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**THE WORKS OF  
WILLIAM HAZLITT—V  
LECTURES ON THE  
ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS**

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# LECTURES ON THE ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS

BY  
WILLIAM HAZLITT  
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY  
R. BRIMLEY JOHNSON

'It is a very good office one man does another, when he tells him ~~the~~ manner of his being pleased.'

STEELE



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WILLIAM HAZLITT

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## INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that neither his most intimate friends nor his most sympathetic critics have spoken or written of William Hazlitt with enthusiastic abandon or with spontaneous affection. Men of far less ability than he, and of more limited outlook, have inspired devotion in their lifetime and stirred the pulses of posterity.

His failure in this respect is the more remarkable because "the man's writings are himself. He does not summarize or pigeon-hole the matter ; but goes into it, then and there, before your eyes and takes you with him. You see the picture of which he is writing, you take up the line of argument he is defending, you think out the scheme he is elaborating, you study the author he is criticizing. Your mind shares the processes upon which he is engaged, and becomes lost in them. You read with his gusto or his prejudice, you reason with his vigour, and draw conclusions upon the basis of his experience." In other words, Hazlitt, despite his cynical estimate of the public, actually wrote with a keen sense of personal enjoyment that one would expect to have proved infectious. Yet we think, much and often, of what he has written ; little and seldom of the man himself.

The "Lectures on the Comic Writers" bear out our conclusion in a marked degree. They treat of a genial subject in a spirit of catholic appreciation. We may wonder, by chance, to find Addison and Johnson among the "Comic" writers ; but certainly we need not cavil at the broad-mindedness of a critic sufficiently well

## INTRODUCTION

informed to illuminate every step of the way with his wealth of appropriate comment and illustration.

Hazlitt, moreover, seldom errs in judgment. He ranks the spontaneous humour of Shakespeare above Jonson's scholarly "humours," the robust humanity of Fielding and Smollett above the moralities of the essayists, Steele's tender fancies above the prim periods of Addison. He reflects the sparkle of Congreve, Wycherley, and Farquhar; glories in Goldsmith, Uncle Toby, Sheridan, and above all in Hogarth; while fully alive to the unique "artificial reality" of Richardson. "For if the business of life," as he most happily shows us, "consisted in letter-writing, and was carried on by the post (like a Spanish game of chess), *human nature would be what Richardson represents it.*" Almost the only unreasonable estimate in the whole volume is that of Fanny Burney as "a mere common observer of manners," whom he idly depreciates for one of her most charming qualities—that she never forgot she was a woman. But then women, according to Hazlitt, "learn the idiom of manners and character, as they do that of language, by rote, without troubling themselves about principle."

With this single exception, he not only recognizes the widest diversity in the masters of genius, but discovers, and endows with immortality, a thousand "buried treasures" of the neglected and the forgotten. He never misses the genuine antique, however barren or unsavoury the surrounding dust-heap.

Moreover, he has succeeded more nearly than any other writer on the subject in finding a solution to that most baffling of critical problems—the distinction between wit and humour. For, curiously enough, while any mind of moderate intelligence can generally determine of a given writer, or at least of any particular passage, which element affords the prevailing excellence, the most subtle of our critics have so far failed to discover a quite satisfactory definition of difference. But Hazlitt, at least, expresses an important truth in saying that "Humour is describing the ludicrous as it

is in itself ; wit is the exposing it, by comparing it with something else. Humour is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident, wit is the product of art and fancy."

And Hazlitt's appreciations, despite his mastery of theory, are never academic or even merely intellectual. Happy absurdities keep him in "roars of laughter"; he revels in pure nonsense, and understands the wholesome bracing influence of unthinking merriment. The abandon of the best comedies inspires his whole-hearted enthusiasm.

Here, surely, were matter enough for good fellowship, and that *camaraderie* between writer and reader for which so many a genius of the past will seem always among the best and dearest of our personal friends. Yet Hazlitt never arouses such feelings. His spirited plaudits of rollicking humour leave us emotionally cold. The plays, the novels, or the pictures themselves can give us something to which he never attained. His insight, undoubtedly, will make our enjoyment keener and more subtle; but, perversely enough, we cannot—except as an act of deliberate justice—experience that sense of gratitude which his stimulating suggestiveness undoubtedly deserves.

This failure to excite the ordinary and spontaneous human emotions arises from certain limitations in the man himself, and we need not go beyond these "Lectures" to discover the cause. For it is not necessary, I think, to lay much stress on his own cynical record of his career, to refine upon the supposed compulsion by which he is said to have turned author, or to accept his statement of the affectations deliberately imposed upon his style in contempt of the public preference for meretricious graces. He "resolved," he would have us believe, "to turn over a new leaf,"<sup>1</sup> to take the public at its word, to master all the tropes and figures he could lay his hand on; and, though he was

<sup>1</sup> i.e. to avoid the "original bent of his mind," shown in "the dry and meagre" style of his first work, "*An Essay on the Principle of Human Action*."

## INTRODUCTION

a plain man, never to appear abroad but in an embroidered dress." Such an intention may, in fact, have entered his mind ; it may have recurred to his imagination in moments of bitterness and depression. But it never cooled his intellectual vivacity or hampered his expression. No one can even dip into his essays without an absolute conviction that he wrote as he felt, in a perfectly natural and original style. His son declares that "he could scarcely at the outset see his way two sentences before him"; and, in truth, though fluent and even eloquent, his actual construction is frequently awkward, and he probably always found the art of composition a sufficiently wearisome business. He has no natural graces of style and no instinct for form.<sup>1</sup> He "was a born man of letters, and could not help turning everything he touched into literature," but he "never took kindly to writing as a profession." Yet the enthusiasm which can overcome these very limitations, the genius which his halting sentences never obscure, should by rights, one would imagine, but the more endear the man.

It is not the faults in Hazlitt's style that repel us. Though the cause lies undoubtedly in the man himself, it is no less certainly betrayed in his work. Attempting, for example, to exonerate a certain freedom of expression very prevalent in our old comedies, he remarks that "the consciousness, however it may arise, that there is something we ought to look grave at, is almost always a signal for laughter outright; we can hardly keep our countenance at a sermon, a funeral, or a wedding." He notes, as a fault in Shakespeare, that "the spirit of humanity and the fancy of the poet generally prevail over the mere wit and satire; we sympathize with his characters more often than we laugh at them. . . . The ridicule wants the

<sup>1</sup> In the "Lectures on Comic Writers," for example, he is often obscure, or at least peculiarly awkward, in the use of pronouns; and one passage on Hogarth is both clumsy and incorrect—"He belongs to no class, *or if he does*, it is to the same classes as Fielding, Smollett, Vanbrugh, and Moliere."

sting of ill-nature. . . . He hardly had such a thing as spleen in his nature." And again, "The wit and humour, however diverting, is social and humane. But this is not the distinguishing characteristic of wit, which is generally provoked by folly and spends its venom on vice." Finally: "I do not consider comedy as exactly an affair of the heart or the imagination; and it is for this reason only that I think *Shakespeare's comedies deficient.*"

The savage bitterness of his own temperament applauds the "sting of ill-nature" and tempts him to conceal his personal bias by the ingenious sophism that, because the *combination* of poetry or imagination with wit or humour is only possible to the mightiest genius, it produces an inferior form of comedy. Since many have failed in the attempt, the ideal itself must be mistaken. Again, he "had rather see Mrs. Abington's Millamant than any Rosalind that ever appeared," and therefore Millamant is "better adapted to the stage than Rosalind"—a poor compliment to the dramatic profession.

He accounts for the decay of Comedy in a similar spirit. The comedy of the Stage has killed the comedy of Life. Manners have become more uniform (though, as he justly observed, no more essentially moral or refined), and eccentricities less prominent; all the material for legitimate comedy must vanish as civilization advances. He seems to consider that circumstances which have undoubtedly made the art, alike for author and actor, more difficult by demanding greater subtlety of treatment, have destroyed it altogether.

His apparent satisfaction in the second-best, his assumption that the particular form of literature he invites us to enjoy must degenerate, are not encouraging to enthusiasm. The banishment of heart and imagination from the realm of comedy, the demand for spleen and ill-nature as essential ingredients to wit, provide decisive evidence of his limitations.

They seem to have poisoned his personal experience,

## INTRODUCTION

and they certainly vitiate his best work. Hazlitt, in fact, was never in love with life. Brought up in a Unitarian home, and educated for the ministry at a Unitarian college, he early acquired "that passion for truth" and that "incorrigible attachment to a general proposition" which he describes as the guiding principle of his existence. The lack of emotional nourishment in youth, when the healthy human animal lives by feeling and the wildest imaginings colour reality, closed the normal outlets to a sensitive nature. The "siren's song" of Coleridge "stunned and startled" him, "as it were, from sleep," and dethroned the ideal of Justice for that of Beauty. But the awakening was intellectual, impersonal, leaving the senses stagnant.

And all the while fires were smouldering within the student critic, missing their natural channels of expression; so that Hazlitt grew ever more dissatisfied, morbid, and tempestuous. He was always restless, seeking after he knew not what. Twice he turned to the consolations of marriage, with singularly ill-chosen partners; and fairly ruined his chances of healthy affection by that extraordinary and unsatisfying experience, of which his *Liber Amoris* is the amazing record. He never trusted a friend, yielding continually to petty suspicions, and imagining himself slighted at every word. Yet no man surely stood in more obvious need of the closest human sympathy. He seems to have been occasionally happy in his love for his son; and, strangely enough amid such a chapter of accidents, his devotion was reciprocated.

Such a temperament, such experience, naturally influenced his work: and it is in keeping with the limitations thereby imposed that he, alone among essayists of equal eminence, he, too, who was always writing, and writing with genius, never composed a line of poetry, never told a story, never invented a character.

His services to the art of criticism are manifold and unique: he will be read and remembered, with admiration and applause, until men cease to study books and to love literature. But we are governed more by our

feelings than by abstract justice, and William Hazlitt himself will never conquer our hearts or live in our memory.

His pathetic picture of the little scholar reveals, more eloquently than volumes of unavailing regret or protest, the inward loneliness he had so bitterly experienced :—“ He stirs not, he still pores upon his book ; and as he reads, a slight hectic flush passes over his cheek, for he sees the letters that compose the word ‘fame’ glitter on the page, and his eyes swim, and he thinks that he will one day write a book, and have his name repeated by thousands of readers, and assume a certain signature, and write essays and criticisms in a London magazine, as a consummation of felicity scarcely to be believed ! Come hither, thou poor little fellow, and let us change places with thee, if thou wilt ; here, take the pen, finish this article, and sign what name you please to it ; so that we may but change our dress for yours, and sit shivering in the sun, and con over our little task, and feed poor, and lie hard, and be contented and happy, and think what a fine thing it is to be an author, and dream of immortality, and sleep o’ nights.”

Yet this Man of Discontent, this enemy to himself and his friends, closed his earthly pilgrimage with an utterance of sublime faith in the Blessings he had never enjoyed, the Meaning he had never discovered. Somewhere, in visions he never found language to utter, William Hazlitt had seen God and knew that He was good.

For when, at the age of fifty-two, worn out by his own tempestuous railing at men and things, he “ lay ghastly, shrunk, and helpless on the bed from which he never afterwards arose,” he could yet pronounce with emphasis his own immortal epitaph—“ Well, I’ve had a happy life.”

R. BRIMLEY JOHNSON.



## NOTICE TO THE THIRD EDITION, 1841

THE Lectures forming this volume were delivered at the Surrey Institution in 1818, and published immediately afterwards. The present Edition, however, contains some additions from other sources, collected by the author, apparently with a view to a reprint of the volume, which additions are distinguished by brackets. Some of these are taken from an article contributed by the author to the *Morning Chronicle* in, I think, 1813, and the rest are critical prefaces, written by my father for Mr. Oxberry's Editions of the various Plays remarked upon. Having determined upon the speedy publication, in a collective form, of the whole of my father's writings on Art, and Artists, together with some pieces on these subjects not hitherto edited, I at first conceived it advisable to transfer the "Lecture on Hogarth" to this latter work, where, possibly, in some points of view, it might appear better placed; but, on reflection, I have retained that Lecture in its original position; for, after all, Hogarth was a comic writer, and one of our best; the only difference is, that he wrote on canvas.

W H



## CONTENTS

LECTURE	PAGE
I. INTRODUCTORY.—ON WIT AND HUMOUR . . . . .	1
II. ON SHAKESPEARE AND BEN JONSON . . . . .	36
III. ON COWLEY, BUTLER, SUCKLING, ETHER- EGE, ETC. . . . .	61
IV. ON WYCHERLEY, CONGREVE, VANBRUGH, AND FARQUHAR . . . . .	88
V. ON THE PERIODICAL ESSAYISTS . . . . .	117
VI. ON THE ENGLISH NOVELISTS . . . . .	138
VII. ON THE WORKS OF HOGARTH: ON THE GRAND AND FAMILIAR STYLE OF PAINTING . . . . .	175
VIII. ON THE COMIC WRITERS OF THE LAST CENTURY . . . . .	199



# LECTURES

## ON THE

# ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS

### LECTURE I.—INTRODUCTORY

#### ON WIT AND HUMOUR

MAN is the only animal that laughs and weeps ; for he is the only animal that is struck with the difference between what things are, and what they ought to be. We weep at what thwarts or exceeds our desires in serious matters : we laugh at what only disappoints our expectations in trifles. We shed tears from sympathy with real and necessary distress ; as we burst into laughter from want of sympathy with that which is unreasonable and unnecessary, the absurdity of which provokes our spleen or mirth, rather than any serious reflections on it.

To explain the nature of laughter and tears, is to account for the condition of human life ; for it is in a manner compounded of these two ! It is a tragedy or a comedy—sad or merry, as it happens. The crimes and misfortunes that are inseparable from it, shock and wound the mind when they once seize upon it, and when the pressure can no longer be borne, seek relief in tears : the follies and absurdities that men commit, or the odd accidents that befall them, afford us amusement from the very rejection of these false claims upon our sympathy, and end in laughter. If everything that went wrong, if every vanity or weak-

## 2 THE ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS

ness in another gave us a sensible pang, it would be hard indeed : but as long as the disagreeableness of the consequences of a sudden disaster is kept out of sight by the immediate oddity of the circumstances, and the absurdity or unaccountableness of a foolish action is the most striking thing in it, the ludicrous prevails over the pathetic, and we receive pleasure instead of pain from the farce of life which is played before us, and which discomposes our gravity as often as it fails to move our anger or our pity !

Tears may be considered as the natural and involuntary resource of the mind overcome by some sudden and violent emotion, before it has had time to reconcile its feelings to the change of circumstances : while laughter may be defined to be the same sort of convulsive and involuntary movement, occasioned by mere surprise or contrast (in the absence of any more serious emotion), before it has time to reconcile its belief to contradictory appearances. If we hold a mask before our face, and approach a child with this disguise on, it will at first, from the oddity and incongruity of the appearance, be inclined to laugh ; if we go nearer to it, steadily, and without saying a word, it will begin to be alarmed, and be half-inclined to cry : if we suddenly take off the mask, it will recover from its fears, and burst out a-laughing ; but if, instead of presenting the old well-known countenance, we have concealed a satyr's head or some frightful caricature behind the first mask, the suddenness of the change will not in this case be a source of merriment to it, but will convert its surprise into an agony of consternation, and will make it scream out for help, even though it may be convinced that the whole is a trick at bottom.

The alternation of tears and laughter, in this little episode in common life, depends almost entirely on the greater or less degree of interest attached to the different changes of appearance.

The mere suddenness of the transition, the mere balking our expectations, and turning them abruptly

into another channel, seems to give additional liveliness and gaiety to the animal spirits; but the instant the change is not only sudden, but threatens serious consequences, or calls up the shape of danger, terror supersedes our disposition to mirth, and laughter gives place to tears. It is usual to play with infants, and make them laugh by clapping your hands suddenly before them; but if you clapped your hands too loud, or too near their sight, their countenances immediately change, and they hide them in the nurse's arms. Or suppose the same child, grown up a little older, comes to a place, expecting to meet a person it is particularly fond of, and does not find that person there, its countenance suddenly falls, its lips begin to quiver, its cheek turns pale, its eye glistens, and it vents its little sorrow (grown too big to be concealed) in a flood of tears. Again, if the child meets the same person unexpectedly after a long absence, the same effect will be produced by an excess of joy, with different accompaniments; that is, the surprise and the emotion excited will make the blood come into his face, his eyes sparkle, his tongue falter or be mute, but in either case the tears will gush to his relief, and lighten the pressure about his heart. On the other hand, if a child is playing at hide-and-seek, or blind-man's-buff, with persons it is ever so fond of, and either misses them where it had made sure of finding them, or suddenly runs up against them where it had least expected it, the shock or additional impetus given to the imagination by the disappointment or the discovery, in a matter of this indifference, will only vent itself in a fit of laughter.<sup>1</sup> The transition here is not from one thing of importance to another, or from a state of indifference to a state of strong excitement; but merely from one impression to another that we did not at all expect, and when we had expected just the

<sup>1</sup> A child that has hid itself out of the way in sport, is under a great temptation to laugh at the unconsciousness of others as to its situation. A person concealed from assassins, is in no danger of betraying his situation by laughing.

## 4 THE ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS

contrary. The mind having been led to form a certain conclusion, and the result producing an immediate solution of continuity in the chain of our ideas, this alternate excitement and relaxation of the imagination, the object also striking upon the mind more vividly in its loose unsettled state, and before it has had time to recover and collect itself, causes that alternate excitement and relaxation, or irregular convulsive movement of the muscular and nervous system, which constitutes physical laughter. The *discontinuous* in our sensations produces a correspondent jar and discord in the frame. The steadiness of our faith and of our features begins to give way at the same time. We turn with an incredulous smile from a story that staggers our belief: and we are ready to split our sides with laughing at an extravagance that sets all common sense and serious concern at defiance.

To understand or define the ludicrous, we must first know what the serious is. Now the serious is the habitual stress which the mind lays upon the expectation of a given order of events, following one another with a certain regularity and weight of interest attached to them. When this stress is increased beyond its usual pitch of intensity, so as to overstrain the feelings by the violent opposition of good to bad, or of objects to our desires, it becomes the pathetic or tragical. The ludicrous, or comic is the unexpected loosening or relaxing this stress below its usual pitch of intensity, by such an abrupt transposition of the order of our ideas, as taking the mind unawares, throws it off its guard, startles it into a lively sense of pleasure, and leaves no time nor inclination for painful reflections.

The essence of the laughable then is the incongruous, the disconnecting one idea from another, or the jostling of one feeling against another. The first and most obvious cause of laughter is to be found in the simple succession of events, as in the sudden shifting of a disguise, or some unlooked-for accident, without any absurdity of character or situation. The accidental contradiction between our expectations and the event can

hardly be said, however, to amount to the ludicrous ; it is merely laughable. The ludicrous is where there is the same contradiction between the object and our expectations, heightened by some deformity or inconvenience, that is, by its being contrary to what is customary or desirable ; as the ridiculous, which is the highest degree of the laughable, is that which is contrary not only to custom but to sense and reason, or is a voluntary departure from what we have a right to expect from those who are conscious of absurdity and propriety in words, looks, and actions.

Of these different kinds or degrees of the laughable, the first is the most shallow and short-lived ; for the instant the immediate surprise of a thing's merely happening one way or another is over, there is nothing to throw us back upon our former expectation, and renew our wonder at the event a second time. The second sort, that is, the ludicrous arising out of the improbable or distressing, is more deep and lasting, either because the painful catastrophe excites a greater curiosity, or because the old impression, from its habitual hold on the imagination, still recurs mechanically, so that it is longer before we can seriously make up our minds to the unaccountable deviation from it. The third sort, or the ridiculous arising out of absurdity as well as improbability, that is, where the defect or weakness is of a man's own seeking, is the most refined of all, but not always so pleasant as the last, because the same contempt and disapprobation which sharpens and subtilizes our sense of the impropriety, adds a severity to it inconsistent with perfect ease and enjoyment. This last species is properly the province of satire. The principle of contrast is, however, the same in all the stages, in the simply laughable, the ludicrous, the ridiculous ; and the effect is only the more complete, the more durably and pointedly this principle operates.

To give some examples in these different kinds. We laugh, when children, at the sudden removing of a paste-board mask : we laugh, when grown up, more

## 6 THE ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS

gravely at the tearing off the mask of deceit. We laugh at absurdity ; we laugh at deformity. We laugh at a bottle-nose in a caricature ; at a stuffed figure of an alderman in a pantomime, and at the tale of Slaukenbergius. A dwarf standing by a giant makes a contemptible figure enough. Rosinante and Dapple are laughable from contrast, as their masters from the same principle make two for a pair. We laugh at the dress of foreigners, and they at ours. Three chimney-sweepers meeting three Chinese in Lincoln's Inn Fields, they laughed at one another till they were ready to drop down. Country people laugh at a person because they never saw him before. Any one dressed in the height of the fashion, or quite out of it, is equally an object of ridicule. One rich source of the ludicrous is distress with which we cannot sympathize from its absurdity or insignificance. Women laugh at their lovers. We laugh at a damned author, in spite of our teeth, and though he may be our friend. "There is something in the misfortunes of our best friends that pleases us." We laugh at people on the top of a stage-coach, or in it, if they seem in great extremity. It is hard to hinder children from laughing at a stammerer, at a negro, at a drunken man, or even at a madman. We laugh at mischief. We laugh at what we do not believe. We say that an argument or an assertion that is very absurd, is quite ludicrous. We laugh to show our satisfaction with ourselves, or our contempt for those about us, or to conceal our envy or our ignorance. We laugh at fools, and at those who pretend to be wise—at extreme simplicity, awkwardness, hypocrisy, and affectation. "They were talking of me," says Scrub, "for they laughed *consumedly*." Lord Foppington's insensibility to ridicule, and airs of ineffable self-conceit, are no less admirable ; and Joseph Surface's cant maxims of morality, when once disarmed of their power to do hurt, become sufficiently ludicrous. We laugh at that in others which is a serious matter to ourselves ; because our self-love is stronger than our sympathy,

sooner takes the alarm, and instantly turns our heedless mirth into gravity, which only enhances the jest to others. Some one is generally sure to be the sufferer by a joke. What is sport to one is death to another. It is only very sensible or very honest people who laugh as freely at their own absurdities as at those of their neighbours. In general the contrary rule holds, and we only laugh at those misfortunes in which we are spectators, not sharers. The injury, the disappointment, shame, and vexation that we feel put a stop to our mirth ; while the disasters that come home to us, and excite our repugnance and dismay, are an amusing spectacle to others. The greater resistance we make, and the greater the perplexity into which we are thrown, the more lively and *piquant* is the intellectual display of cross-purposes to the bystanders. Our humiliation is their triumph. We are occupied with the disagreeableness of the result instead of its oddity or unexpectedness. Others see only the conflict of motives and the sudden alternation of events—we feel the pain as well, which more than counterbalances the speculative entertainment we might receive from the contemplation of our abstract situation.

You cannot force people to laugh, you cannot give a reason why they should laugh ;—they must laugh of themselves, or not at all. As we laugh from a spontaneous impulse, we laugh the more at any restraint upon this impulse. We laugh at a thing merely because we ought not. If we think we must not laugh, this perverse impediment makes our temptation to laugh the greater ; for by endeavouring to keep the obnoxious image out of sight, it comes upon us more irresistibly and repeatedly, and the inclination to indulge our mirth, the longer it is held back, collects its force, and breaks out the more violently in peals of laughter. In like manner anything we must not think of makes us laugh, by its coming upon us by stealth and unawares, and from the very efforts we make to exclude it. A secret, a loose word, a wanton jest, makes people laugh. Aretine laughed himself to death

at hearing a lascivious story. Wickedness is often made a substitute for wit; and in most of our good old comedies the intrigue of the plot and the double meaning of the dialogue go hand-in-hand, and keep up the ball with wonderful spirit between them. The consciousness, however it may arise, that there is something that we ought to look grave at, is almost always a signal for laughter outright: we can hardly keep our countenance at a sermon, a funeral, or a wedding. What an excellent old custom was that of throwing the stocking! What a deal of innocent mirth has been spoiled by the disuse of it! It is not an easy matter to preserve decorum in courts of justice; the smallest circumstance that interferes with the solemnity of the proceedings throws the whole place into an uproar of laughter. People at the point of death often say smart things. Sir Thomas More jested with his executioner: Rabelais and Wycherley both died with a *bon-mot* in their mouths.

Misunderstandings (*malentendus*), where one person means one thing, and another is aiming at something else, are another great source of comic humour, on the same principle of ambiguity and contrast.

There is a high-wrought instance of this in the dialogue between Aimwell and Gibbet, in the "Beaux' Stratagem," where Aimwell mistakes his companion for an officer in a marching regiment, and Gibbet takes it for granted that the gentleman is a highwayman. The alarm and consternation occasioned by some one saying to him in the course of common conversation, "I apprehend you," is the most ludicrous thing in that admirably natural and powerful performance, Mr. Emery's "Robert Tyke." Again, unconsciousness in the person himself of what he is about, or of what others think of him, is also a great heightener of the sense of absurdity. It makes it come the fuller home upon us from his insensibility to it. His simplicity sets off the satire, and gives it a finer edge. It is a more extreme case still where the person is aware of being the object of ridicule, and yet seems

perfectly reconciled to it as a matter of course. So wit is often the more forcible and pointed for being dry and serious, for it then seems as if the speaker himself had no intention in it, and we were the first to find it out. Irony, as a species of wit, owes its force to the same principle. In such cases it is the contrast between the appearance and the reality, the suspense of belief, and the seeming incongruity, that gives point to the ridicule, and makes it enter the deeper when the first impression is overcome. Excessive impudence, as in the "Liar"; or excessive modesty, as in the hero of "She Stoops to Conquer"; or a mixture of the two, as in the "Busy Body," are equally amusing. Lying is a species of wit and humour. To lay anything to a person's charge from which he is perfectly free, shows spirit and invention; and the more incredible the effrontery, the greater is the joke.

There is nothing more powerfully humorous than what is called *keeping* in comic character, as we see it very finely exemplified in Sancho Panza and Don Quixote. The proverbial phlegm and the romantic gravity of these two celebrated persons may be regarded as the height of this kind of excellence. The deep feeling of character strengthens the sense of the ludicrous. Keeping in comic character is consistency in absurdity; a determined and laudable attachment to the incongruous and singular. The regularity completes the contradiction; for the number of instances of deviation from the right line, branching out in all directions, shows the inveteracy of the original bias to any extravagance or folly, the natural improbability, as it were, increasing every time with the multiplication of chances for a return to common sense, and in the end mounting up to an incredible and unaccountably ridiculous height, when we find our expectations as invariably baffled. The most curious problem of all, is this truth of absurdity to itself. That reason and good sense should be consistent, is not wonderful: but that caprice, and whim, and

fantastical prejudice, should be uniform and infallible in their results, is the surprising thing. But while this characteristic clue to absurdity helps on the ridicule, it also softens and harmonizes its excesses ; and the ludicrous is here blended with a certain beauty and decorum, from this very truth of habit and sentiment, or from the principle of similitude and dissimilitude. The devotion to nonsense, and enthusiasm about trifles, is highly affecting as a moral lesson : it is one of the striking weaknesses and greatest happinesses of our nature. That which excites so lively and lasting an interest in itself, even though it should not be wisdom, is not despicable in the sight of reason and humanity. We cannot suppress the smile on the lip ; but the tear should also stand ready to start from the eye. The history of hobby-horses is equally instructive and delightful ; and after the pair I have just alluded to, *My Uncle Toby's* is one of the best and gentlest that "ever lifted leg !" The inconveniences, odd accidents, falls, and bruises to which they expose their riders, contribute their share to the amusement of the spectators ; and the blows and wounds that the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance received in his many perilous adventures, have applied their healing influence to many a hurt mind.—In what relates to the laughable, as it arises from unforeseen accidents or self-willed scrapes, the pain, the shame, the mortification, and utter helplessness of situation, add to the joke, provided they are momentary, or overwhelming only to the imagination of the sufferer. Malvolio's punishment and apprehensions are as comic, from our knowing that they are not real, as Christopher Sly's drunken transformation and short-lived dream of happiness are for the like reason. Parson Adams's fall into the tub at the Squire's, or his being discovered in bed with Mrs. Slipslop, though pitiable, are laughable accidents ; nor do we read with much gravity of the loss of his *Aeschylus*, serious as it was to him at the time. A Scotch clergyman, as he was going to church, seeing a spruce, conceited mechanic, who was

walking before him, suddenly covered all over with dirt, either by falling into the kennel, or by some other calamity befalling him, smiled and passed on; but afterwards seeing the same person, who had stopped to rest, seated directly facing him in the gallery, with a look of perfect satisfaction and composure, as if nothing of the sort had happened to him, the idea of his late disaster and present self-complacency struck him so powerfully, that, unable to resist the impulse, he flung himself back in the pulpit, and laughed till he could laugh no longer. I remember reading a story in an odd number of the *European Magazine*, of an old gentleman who used to walk out every afternoon with a gold-headed cane, in the fields opposite Baltimore House, which were then open, only with foot-paths crossing them. He was frequently accosted by a beggar with a wooden leg, to whom he gave money, which only made him more importunate. One day, when he was more troublesome than usual, a well-dressed person happening to come up, and observing how saucy the fellow was, said to the gentleman, "Sir, if you will lend me your cane for a moment, I'll give him a good threshing for his impertinence." The old gentleman, smiling at the proposal, handed him his cane, which the other no sooner was going to apply to the shoulders of the culprit, than he immediately whipped off his wooden leg, and scampered off with great alacrity, and his chastizer after him as hard as he could go. The faster the one ran the faster the other followed him, brandishing the cane, to the great astonishment of the gentleman who owned it, till having fairly crossed the fields, they suddenly turned a corner, and nothing more was seen of either of them.

In the way of mischievous adventure, and a wanton exhibition of ludicrous weakness in character, nothing is superior to the comic parts of the "Arabian Nights' Entertainments." To take only the set of stories of the Little Hunchback, who was choked with a bone, and the Barber of Bagdad and his seven brothers—

there is that of the tailor who was persecuted by the miller's wife, and who, after toiling all night in the mill, got nothing for his pains—of another who fell in love with a fine lady, who pretended to return his passion, and inviting him to her house, as the preliminary condition of her favour, had his eyebrows shaved, his clothes stripped off, and being turned loose into a winding gallery, he was to follow her, and by overtaking obtain all his wishes, but after a turn or two, stumbled on a trap-door, and fell plump into the street, to the great astonishment of the spectators and his own, shorn of his eyebrows, naked, and without a ray of hope left :—that of the castle-building pedlar, who in kicking his wife, the supposed daughter of an emperor, kicks down his basket of glass, the brittle foundation of his ideal wealth, his good fortune, and his arrogance :—that, again, of the beggar who dined with the Barmecide, and feasted with him on the names of wines and dishes : and, last and best of all, the imitable story of the impertinent Barber, himself one of the seven, and worthy to be so ; his pertinacious, incredible, teasing, deliberate, yet unmeaning folly, his wearing out the patience of the young gentleman whom he is sent for to shave, his preparations and his professions of speed, his taking out an astrolabe to measure the height of the sun while his razors are getting ready, his dancing the dance of Zimri and singing the song of Zamout, his disappointing the young man of an assignation, following him to the place of rendezvous, and alarming the master of the house in his anxiety for his safety, by which his unfortunate patron loses his hand in the affray, and this is felt as an awkward accident. The danger which the same loquacious person is afterwards in of losing his head for want of saying who he was, because he would not forfeit his character of being “justly called the Silent,” is a consummation of the jest, though, if it had really taken place, it would have been carrying the joke too far. There are a thousand instances of the same sort in the *Thousand and One Nights*, which are an in-

exhaustible mine of comic humour and invention, and which from the manners of the East which they describe, carry the principle of callous indifference in a jest as far as it can go. The serious and marvellous stories in that work, which have been so much admired and so greedily read, appear to me monstrous and abortive fictitious, like disjointed dreams, dictated by a preternatural dread of arbitrary and despotic power, as the comic and familiar stories are rendered proportionally amusing and interesting from the same principle operating in a different direction, and producing endless uncertainty and vicissitude, and an heroic contempt for the untoward accidents and petty vexations of human life. It is the gaiety of despair, the mirth and laughter of a respite during pleasure from death. The strongest instances of effectual and harrowing imagination are in the story of Amine and her three sisters, whom she led by her side as a leash of hounds, and of the *goul* who nibbled grains of rice for her dinner, and preyed on human carcasses. In this condemnation of the serious parts of the Arabian Nights, I have nearly all the world, and in particular the author of the "Ancient Mariner," against me, who must be allowed to be a judge of such matters, and who said, with a subtlety of philosophical conjecture which he alone possesses, that "if I did not like them, it was because I did not dream." On the other hand, I have Bishop Atterbury on my side, who, in a letter to Pope, fairly confesses that "he could not read them in his old age."

There is another source of comic humour which has been but little touched on or attended to by the critics—not the infliction of casual pain, but the pursuit of uncertain pleasure and idle gallantry. Half the business and gaiety of comedy turns upon this. Most of the adventures, difficulties, demurs, hair-breadth 'scapes, disguises, deceptions, blunders, disappointments, successes, excuses, all the dextrous manœuvres, artful innuendoes, assignations, billets-doux, *double entendres*, sly allusions, and elegant flattery, have an eye to this—to the obtaining of those "favours secret, sweet, and

precious," in which love and pleasure consist, and which when attained, and the *equivoque* is at an end, the curtain drops, and the play is over. All the attractions of a subject that can only be glanced at indirectly, that is a sort of forbidden ground to the imagination, except under severe restrictions, which are constantly broken through; all the resources it supplies for intrigue and invention; the bashfulness of the clownish lover, his looks of alarm and petrified astonishment; the foppish affectation and easy confidence of the happy man; the dress, the airs, the languor, the scorn, and indifference of the fine lady; the bustle, pertness, loquaciousness, and tricks of the chambermaid; the impudence, lies, and roguery of the valet; the match-making and unmaking; the wisdom of the wise; the sayings of the witty; the folly of the fool; "the soldier's, scholar's, courtier's eye, tongue, sword, the glass of fashion and the mould of form," have all a view to this. It is the closet of Blue-Beard. It is the life and soul of Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar's plays. It is the salt of comedy, without which it would be worthless and insipid. It makes Horner decent, and Millamant divine. It is the jest between Tattle and Miss Prue. It is the bait with which Olivia, in the "Plain Dealer," plays with honest Manly. It lurks at the bottom of the catechism which Archer teaches Cherry, and which she learns by heart. It gives the finishing grace to Mrs. Amlet's confession—"Though I'm old, I'm chaste." Valentine and his Angelica would be nothing without it; Miss Peggy would not be worth a gallant; and Slender's "sweet Anne Page" would be no more! "The age of comedy would be gone, and the glory of our play-houses extinguished for ever." Our old comedies would be invaluable, were it only for this, that they keep alive this sentiment, which still survives in all its fluttering grace and breathless palpitations on the stage.

Humour is the describing the ludicrous as it is in itself; wit is the exposing it, by comparing or con-

trasting it with something else. Humour is, as it were, the growth of nature and accident ; wit is the product of art and fancy. Humour, as it is shown in books, is an imitation of the natural or acquired absurdities of mankind, or of the ludicrous in accident, situation, and character ; wit is the illustrating and heightening the sense of that absurdity by some sudden and unexpected likeness or opposition of one thing to another, which sets off the quality we laugh at or despise in a still more contemptible or striking point of view. Wit, as distinguished from poetry, is the imagination or fancy inverted and so applied to given objects, as to make the little look less, the mean more light and worthless ; or to divert our admiration or wean our affections from that which is lofty and impressive, instead of producing a more intense admiration and exalted passion, as poetry does. Wit may sometimes, indeed, be shown in compliments as well as satire ; as in the common epigram—

"Accept a miracle, instead of wit :  
See two dull lines with Stanhope's pencil writ."

But then the mode of paying it is playful and ironical, and contradicts itself in the very act of making its own performance an humble foil to another's. Wit hovers round the borders of the light and trifling, whether in matters of pleasure or pain ; for as soon as it describes the serious seriously, it ceases to be wit, and passes into a different form. Wit is, in fact, the eloquence of indifference, or an ingenious and striking exposition of those evanescent and glancing impressions of objects which affect us more from surprise or contrast to the train of our ordinary and literal preconceptions, than from anything in the objects themselves exciting our necessary sympathy or lasting hatred. The favourite employment of wit is to add littleness to littleness, and heap contempt on insignificance by all the arts of petty and incessant warfare ; or if it ever affects to aggrandize, and use the language of hyperbole, it is only to betray into derision by a fatal comparison, as

## 16 THE ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS

in the mock-heroic ; or if it treats of serious passion, it must do it so as to lower the tone of intense and high-wrought sentiment by the introduction of burlesque and familiar circumstances. To give an instance or two. Butler, in his " *Hudibras*," compares the change of night into day to the change of colour in a boiled lobster.

" The sun had long since, in the lap  
Of Thetis, taken out his nap ;  
And, like a lobster boil'd, the morn  
From black to red began to turn :  
When Hudibras, whom thoughts and aching  
Twixt sleeping kept all night and waking,  
Began to rub his drowsy eyes,  
And from his couch prepared to rise,  
Resolving to dispatch the deed  
He vow'd to do with trusty speed."

Compare this with the following stanzas in Spenser, treating of the same subject :—

" By this the Northern Waggoner had set  
His seven-fold team behind the stedfast star,  
That was in ocean waves yet never wet,  
But firm is fix'd and sendeth light from far  
To all that in the wide deep wand'ring are :  
And cheerful chanticleer with his note shrill,  
Had warned once that Phœbus' fiery car  
In haste was climbing up the eastern hill,  
Full envious that night so long his room did fill.

At last the golden oriental gate  
Of greatest heaven 'gan to open fair,  
And Phœbus, fresh as bridegroom to his mate,  
Came dancing forth, shaking his dewy hair,  
And burl'd his glist'ring beams through gloomy air :  
Which when the wakeful elf perceived, straitway  
He started up, and did himself prepare  
In sun-bright arms and battailous array,  
For with that pagan proud he combat will that day."

In this last passage every image is brought forward that can give effect to our natural impressions of the beauty, the splendour, and solemn grandeur of the rising sun ; pleasure and power wait on every line

and word : whereas, in the other, the only memorable thing is a grotesque and ludicrous illustration of the alteration which takes place from darkness to gorgeous light, and that brought from the lowest instance, and with associations that can only disturb and perplex the imagination in its conception of the real object it describes. There cannot be a more witty, and at the same time degrading comparison, than that in the same author, of the Bear turning round the pole-star to a bear tied to a stake :—

" But now a sport more formidable  
Had raked together village rabble ;  
'Twas an old way of recreating  
Which learned butchers call bear-baiting,  
A bold adventurous exercise  
With ancient heroes in high prize.  
For authors do affirm it came  
From Isthmian or Nemean game ;  
Others derive it from the Bear  
That's fixed in northern hemisphere,  
And round about his pole does make  
A circle like a bear at stake,  
That at the chain's end wheels about  
And overturns the rabble rout."

I need not multiply examples of this sort. Wit or ludicrous invention produces its effect oftenest by comparison, but not always. It frequently effects its purposes by unexpected and subtle distinctions. For instance, in the first kind, Mr. Sheridan's description of Mr. Addington's administration as the fag-end of Mr. Pitt's, who had remained so long on the treasury bench that, like Nicias in the fable, "he left the sitting part of the man behind him," is as fine an example of metaphorical wit as any on record. The same idea seems, however, to have been included in the old well-known nickname of the *Rump Parliament*. Almost as happy an instance of the other kind of wit, which consists in sudden retorts, in turns upon an idea, and diverting the train of your adversary's argument abruptly and adroitly into another channel, may be

## 18 THE ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS

seen in the sarcastic reply of Porson, who hearing some one observe, that "certain modern poets would be read and admired when Homer and Virgil were forgotten," made answer—"And not till then!" Sir Robert Walpole's definition of the gratitude of place-expectants, that "it is a lively sense of *future* favours," is no doubt wit, but it does not consist in the finding out any coincidence or likeness, but in suddenly transposing the order of time in the common account of this feeling, so as to make the professions of those who pretend to it correspond more with their practice. It is filling up a blank in the human heart with a word that explains its hollowness at once. Voltaire's saying, in answer to a stranger who was observing how tall his trees grew—"That they had nothing else to do,"—was a quaint mixture of wit and humour, making it out as if they really led a lazy, laborious life; but there was here neither allusion nor metaphor. Again, that master-stroke in "*Hudibras*" is sterling wit and profound satire, where, speaking of certain religious hypocrites, he says, that they

"Compound for sins they are inclined to  
By damning those they have no mind to ;"

but the wit consists in the truth of the character, and in the happy exposure of the ludicrous contradiction between the pretext and the practice; between their lenity towards their own vices, and their severity to those of others. The same principle of nice distinction must be allowed to prevail in those lines of the same author, where he is professing to expound the dreams of judicial astrology.

"There's but a twinkling of a star  
Betwixt a man of peace and war,  
A thief and justice, fool and knave,  
A huffing officer and a slave;  
A crafty lawyer and pickpocket;  
A great philosopher and a blockhead;  
A formal preacher and a player;  
A learned physician and man-slayer."

The finest piece of wit I know of, is in the lines of Pope on the Lord Mayor's show—

"Now night descending, the proud scene is o'er;  
But lives in Settle's numbers one day more."

This is certainly as mortifying an inversion of the idea of poetical immortality as could be thought of: it fixes the *maximum* of littleness and insignificance; but it is not by likeness to anything else that it does this, but by literally taking the lowest possible duration of ephemeral reputation, marking it (as with a slider) on the scale of endless renown, and giving a rival credit for it as his loftiest praise. In a word, the shrewd separation or disentangling of ideas that seem the same, or where the secret contradiction is not sufficiently suspected, and is of a ludicrous and whimsical nature, is wit just as much as the bringing together those that appear at first sight totally different. There is then no sufficient ground for admitting Mr. Locke's celebrated definition of wit, which he makes to consist in the finding out striking and unexpected resemblances in things so as to make pleasant pictures in the fancy, while judgment and reason, according to him, lie the clean contrary way, in separating and nicely distinguishing those wherein the smallest difference is to be found.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> His words are—"If in having our ideas in the memory ready at hand consists quickness of parts, in this of having them unconfused, and being able nicely to distinguish one thing from another, where there is but the least difference, consists in a great measure the exactness of judgment and clearness of reason, which is to be observed in one man above another. And hence, perhaps, may be given some reason of that common observation, that men who have a great deal of wit and prompt memories, have not always the clearest judgment or deepest reason. For wit lying mostly in the assemblage of ideas, and putting them together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant pictures and agreeable visions in the fancy; judgment, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully one from another ideas wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid

## 20 THE ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS

On this definition, Harris, the author of "Hermes," has very well observed, that the demonstrating the equality of the three angles of a right-angled triangle to two right ones, would, upon the principle here stated, be a piece of wit instead of an act of the judgment or understanding, and Euclid's Elements a collection of epigrams. On the contrary, it has appeared that the detection and exposure of difference, particularly where this implies nice and subtle observation, as in discriminating between pretence and practice, between appearance and reality, is common to wit and satire with judgment and reasoning, and certainly the comparing and connecting our ideas together is an essential part of reason and judgment, as well as of wit and fancy. Mere wit, as opposed to reason or argument, consists in striking out some casual and partial coincidence which has nothing to do, or at least implies no necessary connection with the nature of the things, which are forced into a seeming analogy.

being misled by similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another." (*Essay*, vol. i. p. 143.) This definition, such as it is, Mr. Locke took without acknowledgment from Hobbes, who says in his "Leviathan," "This difference of quickness in imagining is caused by the difference of men's passions, that love and dislike some one thing, some another, and therefore some men's thoughts run one way, some another, and are held to and observe differently the things that pass through their imagination. And whereas in this succession of thoughts there is nothing to observe in the things they think on, but either in what they be like one another, or in what they be unlike, those that observe their similitudes, in case they be such as are but rarely observed by others, are said to have a good wit, by which is meant on this occasion a good fancy. But they that observe their differences and dissimilitudes, which is called distinguishing and discerning, and judging between thing and thing, in case such discerning be not easy, are said to have a good judgment; and particularly in matter of conversation and business, wherein times, places, and persons are to be discerned, this virtue is called discretion. The former, that is, fancy, without the help of judgment, is not commended for a virtue; but the latter, which is judgment or discretion, is commended for itself, without the help of fancy."—*Leviathan*, p. 32.

by a play upon words, or some irrelevant conceit, as in puns, riddles, alliteration, &c. The jest, in all such cases, lies in the sort of mock-identity, or nominal resemblance, established by the intervention of the same words expressing different ideas, and countenancing, as it were, by a fatality of language, the mischievous insinuation which the person who has the wit to take advantage of it wishes to convey. So when the disaffected French wits applied to the new order of the *Fleur du lys* the *double entendre* of *Compagnons d'Ulysse*, or companions of Ulysses, meaning the animal into which the fellow-travellers of the hero of the Odyssey were transformed, this was a shrewd and biting intimation of a galling truth (if truth it were) by a fortuitous concourse of letters of the alphabet, jumping in "a foregone conclusion," but there was no proof of the thing, unless it was self-evident. And, indeed, this may be considered as the best defence of the contested maxim, that *ridicule is the test of truth*; viz. that it does not contain or attempt a formal proof of it, but owes its power of conviction to the bare suggestion of it, so that if the thing when once hinted is not clear in itself, the satire fails of its effect and falls to the ground. The sarcasm here glanced at the character of the new or old French noblesse may not be well-founded; but it is so like truth, and "comes in such a questionable shape," backed with the appearance of an identical proposition, that it would require a long train of facts and laboured arguments to do away the impression, even if we were sure of the honesty and wisdom of the person who undertook to refute it. A flippant jest is as good a test of truth as a solid bribe; and there are serious sophistries,

"Soul-killing lies, and truths that work small good."

as well as idle pleasantries. Of this we may be sure, that ridicule fastens on the vulnerable points of a cause, and finds out the weak sides of an argument; if those who resort to it sometimes rely too much on its success, those who are chiefly annoyed by it almost

always are so with reason, and cannot be too much on their guard against deserving it. Before we can laugh at a thing, its absurdity must at least be open and palpable to common apprehension. Ridicule is necessarily built on certain supposed facts, whether true or false, and on their inconsistency with certain acknowledged maxims, whether right or wrong. It is, therefore, a fair test, if not of philosophical or abstract truth, at least of what is truth according to public opinion and common sense ; for it can only expose to instantaneous contempt that which is condemned by public opinion, and is hostile to the common sense of mankind. Or, to put it differently, it is the test of the quantity of truth that there is in our favourite prejudices. To show how nearly allied wit is thought to be to truth, it is not unusual to say of any person—"Such a one is a man of sense, for though he said nothing, he laughed in the right place."—Alliteration comes in here under the head of a certain sort of verbal wit ; or, by pointing the expression, sometimes points the sense. Mr. Grattan's wit or eloquence (I don't know by what name to call it) would be nothing without this accompaniment. Speaking of some ministers whom he did not like, he said, "Their only means of government are the guinea and the gallows." There can scarcely, it must be confessed, be a more effectual mode of political conversion than one of these applied to a man's friends, and the other to himself. The fine sarcasm of Junius on the effect of the supposed ingratitude of the Duke of Grafton at court—"The instance might be painful, but the principle would please"—notwithstanding the profound insight into human nature it implies, would hardly pass for wit without the alliteration, as some poetry would hardly be acknowledged as such without the rhyme to clinch it. A quotation or a hackneyed phrase, dexterously turned or wrested to another purpose, has often the effect of the liveliest wit. An idle fellow who had only fourpence left in the world, which had been put by to pay for the baking some

meat for his dinner, went and laid it out to buy a new string for a guitar. An old acquaintance, on hearing this story, repeated those lines out of the "Allegro"—

"And ever against eating cares  
Lap me in soft Lydian airs."

The reply of the author of the periodical paper called the *World* to a lady at church, who seeing him look thoughtful, asked what he was thinking of—"The next *World*,"—is a perversion of an established formula of language, something of the same kind.—Rhymes are sometimes a species of wit, where there is an alternate combination and resolution or decomposition of the elements of sound, contrary to our usual division and classification of them in ordinary speech, not unlike the sudden separation and re-union of the component parts of the machinery in a pantomime. The author who excels infinitely the most in this way is the writer of "*Hudibras*." He also excels in the invention of single words and names, which have the effect of wit by sounding big, and meaning nothing:—"full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." But of the artifices of this author's burlesque style I shall have occasion to speak hereafter.—It is not always easy to distinguish between the wit of words and that of things, "For thin partitions do their bounds divide." Some of the late Mr. Curran's *bon mots*, or *jeux d'esprit*, might be said to owe their birth to this sort of equivocal generation; or were a happy mixture of verbal wit and a lively and picturesque fancy, of legal acuteness in detecting the variable applications of words, and of a mind apt at perceiving the ludicrous in external objects. "Do you see any thing ridiculous in this wig?" said one of his brother judges to him. "Nothing but the head," was the answer. Now here instantaneous advantage was taken of the slight technical ambiguity in the construction of language, and the matter-of-fact is flung into the scale as a thumping makeweight. After all, verbal and accidental strokes of wit, though the most surprising

and laughable, are not the best and most lasting. That wit is the most refined and effectual, which is founded on the detection of unexpected likeness or distinction in things, rather than in words. It is more severe and galling, that is, it is more unpardonable though less surprising, in proportion as the thought suggested is more complete and satisfactory, from its being inherent in the nature of the things themselves.

*Hæret lateri lethalis arundo.* Truth makes the greatest libel, and it is that which barbs the darts of wit. The Duke of Buckingham's saying, "Laws are not, like women, the worse for being old," is an instance of a harmless truism and the utmost malice of wit united. This is, perhaps, what has been meant by the distinction between true and false wit. Mr. Addison, indeed, goes so far as to make it the exclusive test of true wit that it will bear translation into another language, that is to say, that it does not depend at all on the form of expression. But this is by no means the case. Swift would hardly have allowed of such a strait-laced theory, to make havoc with his darling conundrums; though there is no one whose serious wit is more that of things, as opposed to a mere play either of words or fancy. I ought, I believe, to have noticed before, in speaking of the difference between wit and humour, that wit is often pretended absurdity, where the person overacts or exaggerates a certain part with a conscious design to expose it as if it were another person, as when Mandrake in the *Twin Rivals* says, "This glass is too big, carry it away, I'll drink out of the bottle." On the contrary, when Sir Hugh Evans says very innocently, "'Od's blessed will, I will not be absent at the grace," though there is here a great deal of humour, there is no wit. This kind of wit of the humorist, where the person makes a butt of himself, and exhibits his own absurdities or foibles purposely in the most pointed and glaring lights, runs through the whole of the character of Falstaff, and is, in truth, the principle on which it is founded. It is an irony directed against oneself. Wit is, in fact, a voluntary

act of the mind, or exercise of the invention, showing the absurd and ludicrous consciously, whether in ourselves or another. Cross-readings, where the blunders are designed, are wit; but if any one were to light upon them through ignorance or accident, they would be merely ludicrous.

It might be made an argument of the intrinsic superiority of poetry or imagination to wit, that the former does not admit of mere verbal combinations. Whenever they do occur, they are uniformly blemishes. It requires something more solid and substantial to raise admiration or passion. The general forms and aggregate masses of our ideas must be brought more into play, to give weight and magnitude. Imagination may be said to be the finding out something similar in things generally alike, or with like feelings attached to them, while wit principally aims at finding out something that seems the same, or amounts to a momentary deception where you least expected it, viz. in things totally opposite. The reason why more slight and partial, or merely accidental and nominal resemblances, serve the purposes of wit, and indeed characterize its essence as a distinct operation and faculty of the mind, is, that the object of ludicrous poetry is naturally to let down and lessen; and it is easier to let down than to raise up; to weaken than to strengthen; to disconnect our sympathy from passion and power, than to attach and rivet it to any object of grandeur or interest; to startle and shock our pre-conceptions, by incongruous and equivocal combinations, than to confirm, enforce, and expand them by powerful and lasting associations of ideas, or striking and true analogies. A slight cause is sufficient to produce a slight effect. To be indifferent or sceptical, requires no effort; to be enthusiastic and in earnest, requires a strong impulse, and collective power. Wit and humour (comparatively speaking, or taking the extremes to judge of the gradations by) appeal to our indolence, our vanity, our weakness, and insensibility; serious and impassioned poetry appeals to our strength,

## 26 THE ENGLISH COMIC WRITERS

our magnanimity, our virtue, and humanity. Anything is sufficient to heap contempt upon an object; even the bare suggestion of a mischievous allusion to what is improper, dissolves the whole charm, and puts an end to our admiration of the sublime or beautiful. Reading the finest passage in Milton's "Paradise Lost" in a false tone, will make it seem insipid and absurd. The cavilling at, or invidiously pointing out, a few slips of the pen, will embitter the pleasure, or alter our opinion of a whole work, and make us throw it down in disgust. The critics are aware of this vice and infirmity in our nature, and play upon it with periodical success. The meanest weapons are strong enough for this kind of warfare, and the meanest hands can wield them. Spleen can subsist on any kind of food. The shadow of a doubt, the hint of an inconsistency, a word, a look, a syllable, will destroy our best-formed convictions. What puts this argument in as striking a point of view as anything, is the nature of parody or burlesque, the secret of which lies merely in transposing or applying at a venture to anything, or to the lowest objects, that which is applicable only to certain given things, or to the highest matters. "From the sublime to the ridiculous, there is but one step." The slightest want of unity of impression destroys the sublime; the detection of the smallest incongruity is an infallible ground to rest the ludicrous upon. But in serious poetry, which aims at riveting our affections, every blow must tell home. The missing a single time is fatal, and undoes the spell. We see how difficult it is to sustain a continued flight of impressive sentiment: how easy it must be then to travesty or burlesque it, to flounder into nonsense, and be witty by playing the fool. It is a common mistake, however, to suppose that parodies degrade, or imply a stigma on the subject: on the contrary, they in general imply something serious or sacred in the originals. Without this, they would be good for nothing; for the immediate contrast would be wanting, and with this they are sure to tell. The best parodies

are, accordingly, the best and most striking things reversed. Witness the common travesties of Homer and Virgil. Mr. Canning's court parodies on Mr. Southey's popular odes are also an instance in point (I do not know which were the cleverest); and the best of the "Rejected Addresses" is the parody on Crabbe, though I do not certainly think that Crabbe is the most ridiculous poet now living.

Lear and the Fool are the sublimest instance I know of passion and wit united, or of imagination unfolding the most tremendous sufferings, and of burlesque on passion playing with it, aiding and relieving its intensity by the most pointed, but familiar and indifferent illustrations of the same thing in different objects, and on a meaner scale. The Fool's reproaching Lear with "making his daughters his mothers," his snatches of proverbs and old ballads, "The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long, that it had its head bit off by its young," and "Whoop jug, I know when the horse follows the cart," are a running commentary of trite truisms, pointing out the extreme folly of the infatuated old monarch, and in a manner reconciling us to its inevitable consequences.

Lastly, there is a wit of sense and observation, which consists in the acute illustration of good sense and practical wisdom by means of some far-fetched conceit or quaint imagery. The matter is sense, but the form is wit. Thus the lines in Pope—

"'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none  
Go just alike; yet each believes his own—"

are witty rather than poetical; because the truth they convey is a mere dry observation on human life, without elevation or enthusiasm, and the illustration of it is of that quaint and familiar kind that is merely curious and fanciful. Cowley is an instance of the same kind in almost all his writings. Many of the jests and witticisms in the best comedies are moral aphorisms and rules for the conduct of life, sparkling with wit and fancy in the mode of expression. The

ancient philosophers also abounded in the same kind of wit, in telling home truths in the most unexpected manner.—In this sense *Aesop* was the greatest wit and moralist that ever lived. Ape and slave, he looked askance at human nature, and beheld its weaknesses and errors transferred to another species. Vice and virtue were to him as plain as any objects of sense. He saw in man a talking, absurd, obstinate, proud, angry animal; and clothed these abstractions with wings, or a beak, or tail, or claws, or long ears, as they appeared embodied in these hieroglyphics in the brute creation. His moral philosophy is natural history. He makes an ass bray wisdom, and a frog croak humanity. The store of moral truth, and the fund of invention in exhibiting it in eternal forms, palpable and intelligible, and delightful to children and grown persons, and to all ages and nations, are almost miraculous. The invention of a fable is to me the most enviable exertion of human genius: it is the discovering a truth to which there is no clue, and which, when once found out, can never be forgotten. I would rather have been the author of "*Aesop's Fables*" than of "*Euclid's Elements*"! That popular entertainment, *Punch* and the *Puppet-show*, owes part of its irresistible and universal attraction to nearly the same principle of inspiring inanimate and mechanical agents with sense and consciousness. The drollery and wit of a piece of wood is doubly droll and farcical. *Punch* is not merry in himself, but "he is the cause of heartfelt mirth in other men." The wires and pulleys that govern his motions are conductors to carry off the spleen, and all "that perilous stuff that weighs upon the heart." If we see a number of people turning the corner of a street, ready to burst with secret satisfaction, and with their faces bathed in laughter, we know what is the matter—that they are just come from a *puppet-show*. Who can see three little painted, patched-up figures, no bigger than one's thumb, strut, squeak, and gibber, sing, dance, chatter, scold, knock one another about the head, give them-

selves airs of importance, and "imitate humanity most abominably," without laughing immoderately? We overlook the farce and mummary of human life in little, and for nothing; and what is still better, it costs them who have to play in it nothing. We place the mirth, and glee, and triumph, to our own account; and we know that the bangs and blows they have received go for nothing, as soon as the showman puts them up in his box and marches off quietly with them, as jugglers of a less amusing description sometimes march off with the wrongs and rights of mankind in their pockets! I have heard no bad judge of such matters say, that "he liked a comedy better than a tragedy, a farce better than a comedy, a pantomime better than a farce, but a puppet-show best of all." I look upon it, that he who invented puppet-shows was a greater benefactor to his species, than he who invented Operas!

I shall conclude this imperfect and desultory sketch of wit and humour with Barrow's celebrated description of the same subject. He says, "—But first it may be demanded, what the thing we speak of is, or what this facetiousness doth import; to which question I might reply, as Democritus did to him that asked the definition of a man—*tis that which we all see and know*; and one better apprehends what it is by acquaintance than I can inform him by description. It is, indeed, a thing so versatile and multiform, appearing in so many shapes, so many postures, so many garbs, so variously apprehended by several eyes and judgments, that it seemeth no less hard to settle a clear and certain notice thereof, than to make a portrait of Proteus, or to define the figure of fleeting air. Sometimes it lieth in pat allusion to a known story, or in seasonable application of a trivial saying, or in forging an apposite tale; sometimes it playeth in words and phrases, taking advantage from the ambiguity of their sense, or the affinity of their sound; sometimes it is wrapped in a dress of luminous expression; sometimes it lurketh under an odd similitude. Sometimes it is lodged in a sly

question, in a smart answer ; in a quirkish reason ; in a shrewd intimation ; in cunningly diverting or cleverly restoring an objection : sometimes it is couched in a bold scheme of speech ; in a tart irony ; in a lusty hyperbole ; in a startling metaphor ; in a plausible reconciling of contradictions, or in acute nonsense : sometimes a scenical representation of persons or things, a counterfeit speech, a mimical look or gesture passeth for it ; sometimes an affected simplicity, sometimes a presumptuous bluntness giveth it being ; sometimes it riseth only from a lucky hitting upon what is strange ; sometimes from a crafty wresting obvious matter to the purpose ; often it consisteth in one knows not what, and springeth up one can hardly tell how. Its ways are unaccountable and inexplicable, being answerable to the numberless rovings of fancy and windings of language. It is, in short, a manner of speaking out of the simple and plain way (such as reason teacheth and knoweth things by), which by a pretty surprising uncouthness in conceit or expression doth affect and amuse the fancy, showing in it some wonder, and breathing some delight thereto. It raiseth admiration, as signifying a nimble sagacity of apprehension, a special felicity of invention, a vivacity of spirit, and reach of wit more than vulgar : it seeming to argue a rare quickness of parts, that one can fetch in remote conceits applicable ; a notable skill that he can dexterously accommodate them to a purpose before him, together with a lively briskness of humour, not apt to damp those sportful flashes of imagination. (Whence in Aristotle such persons are termed *πλεξιοι*, dexterous men, and *εὐτρόποι*, men of facile or versatile manners, who can easily turn themselves to all things, or turn all things to themselves.) It also procureth delight by gratifying curiosity with its rareness or semblance of difficulty (as monsters, not for their beauty but their rarity ; as juggling tricks, not for their use but their abstruseness, are beheld with pleasure) ; by diverting the mind from its road of serious thoughts ; by instilling gaiety and airiness of spirit ; by provoking to such dispositions of spirit, in way of emu-

lation or complaisance, and by seasoning matter, otherwise distasteful or insipid, with an unusual and thence grateful tang."—*Barrow's Works, Serm. 14.*

I will only add, by way of general caution, that there is nothing more ridiculous than laughter without a cause, nor anything more troublesome than what are called laughing people. A professed laugher is as contemptible and tiresome a character as a professed wit: the one is always contriving something to laugh at, the other is always laughing at nothing. An excess of levity is as impertinent as an excess of gravity. A character of this sort is well personified by Spenser, in the "Damsel of the Idle Lake"—

" — who did assay  
To laugh at shaking of the leaves light."

Any one must be mainly ignorant or thoughtless, who is surprised at everything he sees; or wonderfully conceited, who expects everything to conform to his standard of propriety. Clowns and idiots laugh on all occasions; and the common failing of wishing to be thought satirical often runs through whole families in country places, to the great annoyance of their neighbours. To be struck with incongruity in whatever comes before us, does not argue great comprehension or refinement of perception, but rather a looseness and flippancy of mind and temper, which prevents the individual from connecting any two ideas steadily or consistently together. It is owing to a natural crudity and precipitateness of the imagination, which assimilates nothing properly to itself. People who are always laughing, at length laugh on the wrong side of their faces; for they cannot get others to laugh with them. In like manner, an affectation of wit by degrees hardens the heart, and spoils good company and good manners. A perpetual succession of good things puts an end to common conversation. There is no answer to a jest, but another; and even where the ball can be kept up in this way without ceasing, it tires the patience of the

bystanders, and runs the speakers out of breath. Wit is the salt of conversation, not the food.

The four chief names for comic humour out of our own language are Aristophanes and Lucian among the ancients, Molière and Rabelais among the moderns. Of the two first I shall say, for I know, but little. I should have liked Aristophanes better if he had treated Socrates less scurvily, for he has treated him most scurvily both as to wit and argument. His *Plutus* and his *Birds* are striking instances, the one of dry humour, the other of airy fancy.—Lucian is a writer who appears to deserve his full fame: he has the licentious and extravagant wit of Rabelais, but directed more uniformly to a purpose; and his comic productions are interspersed with beautiful and eloquent descriptions, full of sentiment, such as the exquisite account of the fable of the halcyon put into the mouth of Socrates, and the heroic eulogy on Bacchus, which is conceived in the highest strain of glowing panegyric.

The two others author I proposed to mention are modern, and French. Molière, however, in the spirit of his writings, is almost as much an English as a French author—quite a *barbare* in all in which he really excelled. He was unquestionably one of the greatest comic geniuses that ever lived; a man of infinite wit, gaiety, and invention—full of life, laughter, and whim. But it cannot be denied that his plays are in general mere farces, without scrupulous adherence to nature, refinement of character, or common probability. The plots of several of them could not be carried on for a moment without a perfect collusion between the parties to wink at contradictions, and act in defiance of the evidence of their senses. For instance, take the *Médecin malgré lui* ("The Mock Doctor"), in which a common wood-cutter takes upon himself, and is made successfully to support through a whole play, the character of a learned physician, without exciting the least suspicion; and yet notwithstanding the absurdity of the plot, it is one of the most laughable and truly comic productions that can well

be imagined. The rest of his lighter pieces, the *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, *Monsieur Pourceaugnac*, *George Dandin* (or “*Barnaby Brittle*”), &c., are of the same description—gratuitous assumptions of character, and fanciful and outrageous caricatures of nature. He indulges at his peril in the utmost licence of burlesque exaggeration ; and gives a loose to the intoxication of his animal spirits. With respect to his two most laboured comedies, the “*Tartuffe*” and “*Misanthrope*,” I confess that I find them rather hard to get through : they have much of the improbability and extravagance of the others, united with the endless commonplace prosing of French declamation. What can exceed, for example, the absurdity of the “*Misanthrope*,” who leaves his mistress, after every proof of her attachment and constancy, for no other reason than that she will not submit to the *technical formality* of going to live with him in a wilderness ? The characters, again, which Celimene gives of her female friends, near the opening of the play, are admirable satires (as good as Pope’s characters of women), but not exactly in the spirit of comic dialogue. The strictures of Rousseau on this play, in his “*Letter to D’Alembert*,” are a fine specimen of the best philosophical criticism.—The same remarks apply in a greater degree to the “*Tartuffe*.” The long speeches and reasonings in this play tire one almost to death : they may be very good logic, or rhetoric, or philosophy, or anything but comedy. If each of the parties had retained a special pleader to speak his sentiments, they could not have appeared more verbose or intricate. The improbability of the character of Orgon is wonderful. This play is in one point of view invaluable, as a lasting monument of the credulity of the French to all verbal professions of wisdom or virtue ; and its existence can only be accounted for from that astonishing and tyrannical predominance which words exercise over things in the mind of every Frenchman. The *École des Femmes*, from which Wycherley has borrowed his “*Country Wife*,” with the true spirit of original genius, is, in

my judgment, the masterpiece of Molière. The set speeches in the original play, it is true, would not be borne on the English stage, nor indeed on the French, but that they are carried off by the verse. The *Critique de l'École des Femmes*, the dialogue of which is prose, is written in a very different style. Among other things, this little piece contains an exquisite, and almost unanswerable defence of the superiority of comedy over tragedy. Molière was to be excused for taking this side of the question.

A writer of some pretensions among ourselves has reproached the French with "an equal want of books and men." There is a common French print, in which Molière is represented reading one of his plays in the presence of the celebrated Ninon de l'Enclos, to a circle of the wits and first men of his own time. Among these are the great Corneille; the tender, faultless Racine; Fontaine, the artless old man, unconscious of immortality; the accomplished St. Evremond; the Duke de la Rochefoucault, the severe anatomizer of the human breast; Boileau, the flatterer of courts and judge of men! Were these men nothing? They have passed for men (and great ones) hitherto, and though the prejudice is an old one, I should hope it may still last our time.

Rabelais is another name that might have saved this unjust censure. The wise sayings and heroic deeds of Gargantua and Pantagruel ought not to be set down as nothing. I have already spoken my mind at large of this author; but I cannot help thinking of him here, sitting in his easy-chair, with an eye languid with excess of mirth, his lip quivering with a new-born conceit, and wiping his beard after a well-seasoned jest, with his pen held carelessly in his hand, his wine-flagons, and his books of law, of school divinity, and physic before him, which were his jest-books, whence he drew endless stores of absurdity; laughing at the world and enjoying it by turns, and making the world laugh with him again, for the last three

## ON WIT AND HUMOUR 35

hundred years, at his teeming wit and its own prolific follies. Even to those who have never read his works, the name of Rabelais is a cordial to the spirits, and the mention of it cannot consist with gravity or spleen!

## LECTURE II

## ON SHAKESPEARE AND BEN JONSON

DR. JOHNSON thought Shakespeare's comedies better than his tragedies, and gives as a reason, that he was more at home in the one than in the other. That comedies should be written in a more easy and careless vein than tragedies, is but natural. This is only saying that a comedy is not so serious a thing as a tragedy. But that he showed a greater mastery in the one than in the other, I cannot allow, nor is it generally felt. The labour which the Doctor thought it cost Shakespeare to write his tragedies, only showed the labour which it cost the critic in reading them, that is, his general indisposition to sympathize heartily and spontaneously with works of high-wrought passion or imagination. There is not in any part of this author's writings the slightest trace of his having ever been "smit with the love of sacred song," except some passages in Pope. His habitually morbid temperament and saturnine turn of thought required that the string should rather be relaxed than tightened, that the weight upon the mind should rather be taken off than have anything added to it. There was a sluggish moroseness about his moral constitution that refused to be roused to any keen agony of thought, and that was not very safely to be trifled with in lighter matters, though this last was allowed to pass off as the most pardonable offence against the gravity of his pretensions. It is in fact the established rule at present, in these cases, to speak highly of the Doctor's authority, and to dissent from almost every one of his critical decisions. For my own part, I so far consider

this preference given to the comic genius of the poet as erroneous and unfounded, that I should say that he is the only tragic poet in the world in the highest sense, as being on a par with, and the same as Nature, in her greatest heights and depths of action and suffering. There is but one who durst walk within that mighty circle, treading the utmost bound of nature and passion, showing us the dread abyss of woe in all its ghastly shapes and colours, and laying open all the faculties of the human soul to act, to think, and suffer, in direst extremities ; whereas, I think, on the other hand, that in comedy, though his talents there too were as wonderful as they were delightful, yet that there were some before him, others on a level with him, and many close behind him. I cannot help thinking, for instance, that Molière was as great, or a greater comic genius than Shakespeare, though assuredly I do not think that Racine was as great, or a greater tragic genius. I think that both Rabelais and Cervantes, the one in the power of ludicrous description, the other in the invention and perfect keeping of comic character, excelled Shakespeare ; that is, they would have been greater men, if they had had equal power with him over the stronger passions. For my own reading, I like Vanbrugh's "City Wives' Confederacy" as well, or ("not to speak it profanely") better than the "Merry Wives of Windsor," and Congreve's "Way of the World" as well as the "Comedy of Errors" or "Love's Labour's Lost." But I cannot say that I know of any tragedies in the world that make even a tolerable approach to "Hamlet," or "Lear," or "Othello," or some others, either in the sum total of their effect, or in their complete distinctness from everything else, by which they take not only unquestioned, but undivided possession of the mind, and form a class, a world by themselves mingling with all our thoughts like a second being. Other tragedies tell for more or less, are good, bad, or indifferent, as they have more or less excellence of a kind common to them with others : but these stand alone by them-

selves ; they have nothing commonplace in them ; they are a new power in the imagination, they tell for their whole amount, they measure from the ground. There is not only nothing so good (in my judgment) as "Hamlet," or "Lear," or "Othello," or "Macbeth," but there is nothing like "Hamlet," or "Lear," or "Othello," or "Macbeth." There is nothing, I believe, in the majestic Corneille, equal to the stern pride of "Coriolanus" ; or which gives such an idea of the crumbling in pieces of the Roman grandeur, "like an unsubstantial pageant faded," as the "Antony and Cleopatra." But to match the best serious comedies, such as Molière's "Misanthrope" and his "Tartuffe," we must go to Shakespeare's tragic characters, the Timon of Athens or honest Iago, when we shall more than succeed. He put his strength into his tragedies, and played with comedy. He was greatest in what was greatest ; and his *forte* was not trifling, according to the opinion here combated, even though he might do that as well as anybody else, unless he could do it better than anybody else. I would not be understood to say that there are not scenes or whole characters in Shakespeare equal in wit and drollery to anything upon record. Falstaff alone is an instance which, if I would, I could not get over. "He is the leviathan of all the creatures of the author's comic genius, and tumbles about his unwieldy bulk in an ocean of wit and humour." But in general it will be found (if I am not mistaken), that even in the very best of these the spirit of humanity and the fancy of the poet greatly prevail over the mere wit and satire, and that we sympathize with his characters oftener than we laugh at them. His ridicule wants the sting of ill-nature. He had hardly such a thing as spleen in his composition. Falstaff himself is so great a joke, rather from his being so huge a mass of enjoyment than of absurdity. His re-appearance in the "Merry Wives of Windsor" is not "a consummation devoutly to be wished," for we do not take pleasure in the repeated triumphs over him. Mercutio's quips and

banter upon his friends show amazing gaiety, frankness, and volubility of tongue, but we think no more of them when the poet takes the words out of his mouth, and gives the description of Queen Mab. Touchstone, again, is a shrewd biting fellow, a lively, mischievous wag: but still, what are his gibing sentences and chopped logic to the fine moralizing vein of the fantastical Jaques, stretched beneath "the shade of melancholy boughs"? Nothing. That is, Shakespeare was a greater poet than wit; his imagination was the leading and master-quality of his mind, which was always ready to soar into its native element: the ludicrous was only secondary and subordinate. In the comedies of gallantry and intrigue, with what freshness and delight we come to the serious and romantic parts! What a relief they are to the mind, after those of mere ribaldry or mirth! Those in "Twelfth Night," for instance, and "Much Ado about Nothing," where Olivia and Hero are concerned, throw even Malvolio and Sir Toby, and Benedick and Beatrice, into the shade. They "give a very echo to the seat where love is throned." What he has said of music might be said of his own poetry—

"Oh ! it came o'er my ear like the sweet south  
That breathes upon a bank of violets,  
Stealing and giving odour."

How poor, in general, what a falling-off, these parts seem in mere comic authors; how ashamed we are of them; and how fast we hurry the blank verse over, that we may get upon safe ground again, and recover our good opinion of the author! A striking and lamentable instance of this may be found (by any one who chooses) in the high-flown speeches in Sir Richard Steele's "Conscious Lovers." As good an example as any of this informing and redeeming power in our author's genius might be taken from the comic scenes in both parts of "Henry IV." Nothing can go much lower in intellect or morals than many of the characters. Here are knaves and fools in abundance, of

the meanest order, and stripped stark-naked. But genius, like charity, "covers a multitude of sins"; we pity as much as we despise them; in spite of our disgust we like them, because they like themselves, and because we are made to sympathize with them; and the ligament, fine as it is, which links them to humanity, is never broken. Who would quarrel with Wart, or Feeble, or Mouldy, or Bull-calf, or even with Pistol, Nym, or Bardolph? None but a hypocrite. The severe censurers of the morals of imaginary characters can generally find a hole for their own vices to creep out at, and yet do not perceive how it is that the imperfect and even deformed characters in Shakespeare's plays, as done to the life, by forming a part of our personal consciousness, claim our personal forgiveness, and suspend or evade our moral judgment, by bribing our self-love to side with them. Not to do so, is not morality, but affectation, stupidity, or ill-nature. I have more sympathy with one of Shakespeare's pick-purses, Gadshill or Peto, than I can possibly have with any member of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, and would by no means assist to deliver the one into the hands of the other. Those who cannot be persuaded to draw a veil over the foibles of ideal characters, may be suspected of wearing a mask over their own! Again, in point of understanding and attainments, Shallow sinks low enough; and yet his cousin Silence is a foil to him; he is the shadow of a shade, glimmers on the very verge of downright imbecility, and totters on the brink of nothing. "He has been merry twice and once ere now," and is hardly persuaded to break his silence in a song. Shallow has "heard the chimes at midnight," and roared out glees and catches at taverns and inns of court, when he was young. So, at least, he tells his cousin Silence, and Falstaff encourages the loftiness of his pretensions. Shallow would be thought a great man among his dependants and followers; Silence is nobody—not even in his own opinion; yet he sits in the orchard, and eats his caraways and

pippins among the rest. Shakespeare takes up the meanest subjects with the same tenderness that we do an insect's wing, and would not kill a fly. To give a more particular instance of what I mean, I will take the inimitable and affecting, though most absurd and ludicrous dialogue, between Shallow and Silence, on the death of old Double.

*"Shallow. Come on, come on, come on; give me your hand, sir; give me your hand, sir; an early stirrer, by the rood. And how doth my good cousin Silence?"*

*Silence. Good-morrow, good cousin Shallow.*

*Shallow. And how doth my cousin, your bedfellow! and your fairest daughter, and mine, my god-daughter Ellen!*

*Silence. Alas, a black ouzel, cousin Shallow.*

*Shallow. By yea and nay, sir; I dare say, my cousin William is become a good scholar: he is at Oxford still, is he not?*

*Silence. Indeed, sir, to my cost.*

*Shallow. He must then to the inns of court shortly. I was once of Clement's inn; where, I think, they will talk of mad Shallow yet.*

*Silence. You were called lusty Shallow then, cousin.*

*Shallow. I was called anything, and I would have done anything indeed, and roundly too. There was I, and little John Doit of Staffordshire, and black George Bare, and Francis Pickbone, and Will Squele, a Cotswold man, you had not four such swinge-bucklers in all the inns of court again; and, I may say to you, we knew where the bonarobas were, and had the best of them all at commandment. Then was Jack Falstaff, now Sir John, a boy, and page to Thomas Mowbray, Duke of Norfolk.*

*Silence. This Sir John, cousin, that comes hither anon about soldiers?*

*Shallow. The same Sir John, the very same: I saw him break Schoggan's head at the court-gate, when he was a crack, not thus high; and the very same day did I fight with one Sampson Stockfish, a fruiterer, behind Gray's-inn. O, the mad days that I have spent! and to see how many of mine old acquaintances are dead!*

*Silence. We shall all follow, cousin.*

*Shallow. Certain, 'tis certain, very sure, very sure: death (as the Psalmist saith) is certain to all, all shall die.—How a good yoke of bullocks at Stamford fair!*

*Silence. Truly, cousin, I was not there.*

*Shallow. Death is certain. Is old Double of your town living yet?*

*Silence.* Dead, sir.

*Shallow.* Dead ! see, see ! he drew a good bow ; and dead ! he shot a fine shoot. John of Gaunt loved him well, and betted much money on his head. Dead ! he would have clapped i' th' clout at twelve score ; and carried you a fore-hand shaft a fourteen and a half, that it woulde have done a man's heart good to see.—How a score of ewes now !

*Silence.* Thereafter as they be : a score of good ewes may be worth ten pounds.

*Shallow.* And is old Double dead ? ”

There is not anything more characteristic than this in all Shakespeare. A finer sermon on mortality was never preached. We see the frail condition of human life, and the weakness of the human understanding in Shallow's reflections on it ; who, while the past is sliding from beneath his feet, still clings to the present. The meanest circumstances are shown through an atmosphere of abstraction that dignifies them : their very insignificance makes them more affecting, for they instantly put a check on our aspiring thoughts, and remind us that, seen through that dim perspective, the difference between the great and little, the wise and foolish, is not much. “One touch of nature makes the whole world kin” : and old Double, though his exploits had been greater, could but have had his day. There is a pathetic *naïveté* mixed up with Shallow's commonplace reflections and impertinent digressions. The reader laughs (as well he may) in reading the passage, but he lays down the book to think. The wit, however diverting, is social and humane. But this is not the distinguishing characteristic of wit, which is generally provoked by folly, and spends its venom upon vice.

The fault, then, of Shakespeare's comic Muse is, in my opinion, that it is too good-natured and magnanimous. It mounts above its quarry. It is “apprehensive, quick, forgetive, full of nimble, fiery, and delectable shapes” : but it does not take the highest pleasure in making human nature look as mean, as ridiculous, and contemptible as possible. It is in this respect, chiefly, that it differs from the comedy of a later, and (what is called) a more refined period.

Genteel comedy is the comedy of fashionable life, and of artificial character and manners. The most pungent ridicule is that which is directed to mortify vanity, and to expose affectation ; but vanity and affectation, in their most exorbitant and studied excesses, are the ruling principles of society, only in a highly advanced state of civilization and manners. Man can hardly be said to be a truly contemptible animal, till, from the facilities of general intercourse, and the progress of example and opinion, he becomes the ape of the extravagances of other men. The keenest edge of satire is required to distinguish between the true and false pretensions to taste and elegance ; its lash is laid on with the utmost severity, to drive before it the common herd of knaves and fools, not to lacerate and terrify the single stragglers. In a word, it is when folly is epidemic, and vice worn as a mark of distinction, that all the malice of wit and humour is called out and justified to detect the imposture, and prevent the contagion from spreading. The fools in Wycherley and Congreve are of their own, or one another's making, and deserve to be well scoured into common sense and decency : the fools in Shakespeare are of his own or nature's making ; and it would be unfair to probe to the quick, or hold up to unqualified derision, the faults which are involuntary and incorrigible, or those which you yourself encourage and exaggerate, from the pleasure you take in witnessing them. Our later comic writers represent a state of manners, in which to be a man of wit and pleasure about town was become the fashion, and in which the swarms of egregious pretenders in both kinds openly kept one another in countenance, and were become a public nuisance. Shakespeare, living in a state of greater rudeness and simplicity, chiefly gave certain characters which were a kind of *grotesques*, or solitary excrescences growing up out of their native soil without affectation, and which he undertook kindly to pamper for the public entertainment. For instance, Sir Andrew Aguecheek is evidently a creature of the poet's own fancy. The

author lends occasion to his absurdity to show itself as much as he pleases, devises antics for him which would not enter into his own head, makes him "go to church in a galliard, and return home in a coranto"; adds fuel to his folly, or throws cold water on his courage; makes his puny extravagances venture out or slink into corners without asking his leave; encourages them into indiscreet luxuriance, or checks them in the bud, just as it suits him for the jest's sake. The gratification of the fancy, "and furnishing matter for innocent mirth," are, therefore, the chief object of this and other characters like it, rather than reforming the moral sense, or indulging our personal spleen. But Tattle and Sparkish, who are fops cast not in the mould of fancy, but of fashion, who have a tribe of forerunners and followers, who catch certain diseases of the mind on purpose to communicate the infection, and are screened in their preposterous eccentricities by their own conceit and by the world's opinion, are entitled to no quarter, and receive none. They think themselves objects of envy and admiration, and on that account are doubly objects of our contempt and ridicule.—We find that the scenes of Shakespeare's comedies are mostly laid in the country, or are transferable there at pleasure. The genteel comedy exists only in towns, and crowds of borrowed characters, who copy others as the satirist copies them, and who are only seen to be despised. "All beyond Hyde Park is a desert" to it: while there the pastoral and poetic comedy begins to vegetate and flourish, unpruned, idle, and fantastic. It is hard to "lay waste a country gentleman" in a state of nature, whose humours may have run a little wild or to seed, or to lay violent hands on a young booby 'squire, whose absurdities have not yet arrived at years of discretion: but my Lord Foppington, who is "the prince of coxcombs," and "proud of being at the head of so prevailing a party," deserves his fate. I am not for going so far as to pronounce Shakespeare's "manners damnable, because he had not seen the court"; but I think that comedy does not find its richest harvest till individual

infirmities have passed into general manners, and it is the example of courts, chiefly, that stamps folly with credit and currency, or glosses over vice with meretricious lustre. I conceive, therefore, that the golden period of our comedy was just after the age of Charles II, when the town first became tainted with the affectionation of the manners and conversation of fashionable life, and before the distinction between rusticity and elegance, art and nature, was lost (as it afterwards was) in a general diffusion of knowledge, and the reciprocal advantages of civil intercourse. It is to be remarked, that the union of the three gradations of artificial elegance and courtly accomplishments in one class, of the affectionation of them in another, and of absolute rusticity in a third, forms the highest point of perfection of the comedies of this period, as we may see in Vanbrugh's Lord Foppington, Sir Tunbelly Clumsy, and Miss Hoyden; Lady Townly, Count Basset, and John Moody; in Congreve's Millamant, Lady Wishfort, Witwoud, Sir Wilful Witwoud, and the rest.

In another point of view, or with respect to that part of comedy which relates to gallantry and intrigue, the difference between Shakespeare's comic heroines and those of a later period may be referred to the same distinction between natural and artificial life, between the world of fancy and the world of fashion. The refinements of romantic passion arise out of the imagination brooding over "airy nothing," or over a favourite object, where "love's golden shaft hath killed the flock of all affections else": whereas the refinements of this passion in genteel comedy, or in everyday life, may be said to arise out of repeated observation and experience, diverting and frittering away the first impressions of things by a multiplicity of objects, and producing, not enthusiasm, but fastidiousness or giddy dissipation. For the one a comparatively rude age and strong feelings are best fitted; for "there the mind must minister to itself": to the other, the progress of society and a knowledge of the

world are essential ; for here the effect does not depend on leaving the mind concentrated in itself, but on the wear and tear of the heart, amidst the complex and rapid movements of the artificial machinery of society, and the arbitrary subjection of the natural course of the affections to every the slightest fluctuation of fashion, caprice, or opinion. Thus Olivia, in "Twelfth Night," has but one admirer of equal rank with herself, and but one love, to whom she innocently plights her hand and heart ; or if she had a thousand lovers, she would be the sole object of their adoration and burning vows, without a rival. The heroine of romance and poetry sits secluded in the bowers of fancy, sole queen and arbitress of all hearts ; and as the character is one of imagination, "of solitude and melancholy musing born," so it may be best drawn from the imagination. Millamant, in the "Way of the World," on the contrary, who is the fine lady or heroine of comedy, has so many lovers, that she surfeits on admiration, till it becomes indifferent to her ; so many rivals, that she is forced to put on a thousand airs of languid affectation to mortify and vex them more ; so many offers, that she at last gives her hand to the man of her heart, rather to escape the persecution of their addresses, and out of levity and disdain, than from any serious choice of her own. This is a comic character ; its essence consists in making light of things from familiarity and use, and as it is formed by habit and outward circumstances, so it requires actual observation, and an acquaintance with the modes of artificial life, to describe it with the utmost possible grace and precision. Congreve, who had every other opportunity, was but a young man when he wrote this character ; and that makes the miracle the greater.

I do not, in short, consider comedy as exactly an affair of the heart or the imagination ; and it is for this reason only that I think Shakespeare's comedies deficient. I do not, however, wish to give a preference of any comedies over his ; but I do perceive a difference between his comedies and some others that are,

notwithstanding, excellent in their way, and I have endeavoured to point out in what this difference consists, as well as I could. Finally, I will not say that he had not as great a natural genius for comedy as any one; but I may venture to say, that he had not the same artificial models and regulated mass of fashionable absurdity or elegance to work upon.

The superiority of Shakespeare's natural genius for comedy cannot be better shown than by a comparison between his comic characters and those of Ben Jonson. The matter is the same: but how different is the manner! The one gives fair play to nature and his own genius, while the other trusts almost entirely to imitation and custom. Shakespeare takes his groundwork in individual character and the manners of his age, and raises from them a fantastical and delightful superstructure of his own: the other takes the same groundwork in matter-of-fact, but hardly ever rises above it; and the more he strives, is but the more enveloped "in the crust of formality" and the crude circumstantialis of his subject. His genius (not to profane an old and still venerable name, but merely to make myself understood) resembles the grub more than the butterfly, plods and grovels on, wants wings to wanton in the idle summer's air, and catch the golden light of poetry. Ben Jonson is a great borrower from the works of others, and a plagiarist even from Nature; so little freedom is there in his imitations of her, and he appears to receive her bounty like an alms. His works read like translations, from a certain cramp manner, and want of adaptation. Shakespeare, even when he takes whole passages from books, does it with a spirit, felicity, and mastery over his subject, that instantly makes them his own; and shows more independence of mind and original thinking in what he plunders without scruple, than Ben Jonson often did in his most studied passages, forced from the sweat and labour of his brain. His style is as dry, as literal, and meagre, as Shakespeare's is exuberant, liberal, and unrestrained. The one labours

hard, lashes himself up, and produces little pleasure with all his fidelity and tenaciousness of purpose : the other, without putting himself to any trouble, or thinking about his success, performs wonders,—

“ Does mad and frantic execution,  
Engaging and redeeming of himself,  
With such a careless force and forceless<sup>1</sup> care,  
As if that luck, in very spite of cunning,  
Bad him win all.”

There are people who cannot taste olives—and I cannot much relish Ben Jonson, though I have taken some pains to do it, and went to the task with every sort of goodwill. I do not deny his power or his merit ; far from it : but it is to me of a repulsive and unamiable kind. He was a great man in himself, but one cannot readily sympathize with him. His works, as the characteristic productions of an individual mind, or as records of the manners of a particular age, cannot be valued too highly ; but they have little charm for the mere general reader. Schlegel observes, that whereas Shakespeare gives the springs of human nature, which are always the same, or sufficiently so to be interesting and intelligible ; Jonson chiefly gives the *humours* of men, as connected with certain arbitrary or conventional modes of dress, action, and expression, which are intelligible only while they last, and not very interesting at any time. Shakespeare's characters are men ; Ben Jonson's are more like machines, governed by mere routine, or by the convenience of the poet, whose property they are. In reading the one, we are let into the minds of his characters, we see the play of their thoughts, how their humours flow and work : the author takes a range over nature, and has an eye to every object or occasion that presents itself to set off and heighten the ludicrous character he is describing. His humour (so to speak) bubbles, sparkles, and finds its way in all directions, like a natural spring. In

<sup>1</sup> Unforced.

Ben Jonson it is, as it were, confined in a leaden cistern, where it stagnates and corrupts ; or directed only through certain artificial pipes and conduits to answer a given purpose. The comedy of this author is far from being "lively, audible, and full of vent" : it is for the most part obtuse, obscure, forced, and tedious. He wears out a jest to the last shred and coarsest grain. His imagination fastens instinctively on some one mark or sign by which he designates the individual, and never lets it go, for fear of not meeting with any other means to express himself by. A cant phrase, an odd gesture, an old-fashioned regimental uniform, a wooden leg, a tobacco-box, or a hacked sword, are the standing topics by which he embodies his characters to the imagination. They are cut-and-dried ~~comedy~~ ; the letter, not the spirit of wit and humour. Each of his characters has a particular cue, a professional badge which he wears and is known by, and by nothing else. Thus there is no end of Captain Otter, his Bull, his Bear, and his Horse, which are no joke at first, and do not become so by being repeated twenty times. It is a mere matter of fact, that some landlord of his acquaintance called his drinking cups by these ridiculous names ; but why need we be told so more than once, or indeed at all ? There is almost a total want of variety, fancy, relief, and of those delightful transitions which abound, for instance, in Shakespeare's tragi-comedy. In Ben Jonson, we find ourselves generally in low company, and we see no hope of getting out of it. He is like a person who fastens upon a disagreeable subject, and cannot be persuaded to leave it. His comedy, in a word, has not what Shakespeare somewhere calls "bless'd conditions." It is ~~cross~~-grained, mean, and ~~mechanical~~. It is handicraft wit. Squalid poverty, sheer ignorance, bare-faced impudence, or idiot imbecility, are his dramatic commonplaces—things that provoke pity or disgust, instead of laughter. His portraits are caricatures by dint of their very likeness, being extravagant tautologies of themselves ; as his plots are improbable by an excess

of consistency; for he goes thorough-stitch with whatever he takes in hand, makes one contrivance answer all purposes, and every obstacle give way to a predetermined theory. For instance, nothing can be more incredible than the mercenary conduct of Corvino, in delivering up his wife to the palsied embraces of Volpone; and yet the poet does not seem in the least to boggle at the incongruity of it: but the more it is in keeping with the absurdity of the rest of the fable, and the more it advances it to an incredible catastrophe, the more he seems to dwell upon it with complacency and a sort of wilful exaggeration, as if it were a logical discovery or corollary from well-known premises. He would no more be baffled in the working out a plot, than some people will be baffled in an argument. "If to be wise were to be obstinate," our author might have laid signal claim to this title. Old Ben was of a scholastic turn, and had dealt a little in the occult sciences and controversial divinity. He was a man of strong crabbed sense, retentive memory, acute observation, great fidelity of description and keeping in character, a power of working out an idea so as to make it painfully true and oppressive, and with great honesty and manliness of feeling, as well as directness of understanding: but with all this, he wanted, to my thinking, that genial spirit of enjoyment and finer fancy, which constitute the essence of poetry and of wit. The sense of reality exercised a despotic sway over his mind, and equally weighed down and clogged his perception of the beautiful or the ridiculous. He had a keen sense of what was true and false, but not of the difference between the agreeable and the disagreeable; or if he had, it was by his understanding rather than his imagination, by rule and method, not by sympathy, or intuitive perception of "the gayest, happiest attitude of things." There was nothing spontaneous, no impulse or ease about his genius: it was all forced, up-hill work, making a toil of a pleasure. And hence his overweening admiration of his own works, from the effort they

had cost him, and the apprehension that they were not proportionably admired by others, who knew nothing of the pangs and throes of his Muse in child-bearing. In his satirical descriptions he seldom stops short of the lowest and most offensive point of meanness; and in his serious poetry he seems to repose with complacency only on the pedantic and far-fetched, the *Ultima Thule* of his knowledge. He has a conscience of letting nothing escape the reader that he knows. *Aliquando sufflaminandus erat*, is as true of him as it was of Shakespeare, but in a quite different sense. He is doggedly bent upon fatiguing you with a favourite idea; whereas Shakespeare overpowers and distracts attention by the throng and indiscriminate variety of his. His "Sad Shepherd" is a beautiful fragment. It was a favourite with the late Mr. Horne Tooke: indeed it is no wonder, for there was a sort of sympathy between the two men. Ben was like the modern wit and philosopher, a grammarian and a hard-headed thinker. There is an amusing account of Ben Jonson's private manners in "Howel's Letters," which is not generally known, and which I shall here extract.

"From JAMES HOWEL, Esq., to SIR THOMAS HAWK, Kt.

"WESTMINSTER, 5th April, 1636.

"SIR,—I was invited yesternight to a solemn supper by B. J., where you were deeply remembered; there was good company, excellent cheer, choice wines, and jovial welcome: one thing intervened, which almost spoiled the relish of the rest, that B. began to engross all the discourse, to vapour extremely by himself, and, by vilifying others, to magnify his own Muse. T. Ca. (Tom Carew) buzzed me in the ear, that though Ben had barrelled up a great deal of knowledge, yet it seems he had not read the ethics, which, among other precepts of morality, forbid self-commendation, declaring it to be an ill-favoured solecism in good manners. It made me think upon the lady (not very young) who, having a good while given her guest neat entertainment, a capon being brought upon the table, instead of a spoon, she took a mouthful of claret, and spouted into the hollow bird: such

an accident happened in this entertainment: you know—*propria laus sorbet in ore*: be a man's breath ever so sweet, yet it makes one's praise stink, if he makes his own mouth the conduit-pipe of it. But, for my part, I am content to dispense with the Roman infirmity of Ben, now that time hath snowed upon his pericranium. You know Ovid and (your) Horace were subject to this humour, the first bursting out into—

Jamque opus exegi, quod nec Jovis ira nec ignis, &c.

The other into—

Exegi monumentum sare perennius, &c.

As also Cicero, while he forced himself into this hexameter: *O fortunatam natum me consul Romam!* There is another reason that excuseth B., which is, that if one be allowed to love the natural issue of his body, why not that of the brain, which is of a spiritual and more noble extraction?"

The concurring testimony of all his contemporaries agrees with his own candid avowal, as to Ben Jonson's personal character. He begins, for instance, an epistle to Drayton in these words :—

" Michael, by some 'tis doubted if I be  
A friend at all; or, if a friend, to thee."

Of Shakespeare's comedies I have already given a detailed account, which is before the public, and which I shall not repeat of course; but I shall give a cursory sketch of the principal of Ben Jonson's. [It has been observed of this author, that he painted not so much human nature as temporary manners; not the characters of men, but their humours; that is to say, peculiarities of phrase, modes of dress, gesture, &c., which becoming obsolete, and being in themselves altogether arbitrary and fantastical, have become unintelligible and uninteresting.] The "Silent Woman" is built upon the supposition of an old citizen disliking noise, who takes to wife Epicene (a supposed young lady) for the reputation of her silence, and with a view to disinherit his nephew, who has laughed at his infirmity; when the ceremony is no sooner over than the bride turns out a very shrew, his house becomes a

very Babel of noises, and he offers his nephew his own terms to unloose the matrimonial knot, which is done by proving that Epicene is no woman. There is some humour in the leading character, but too much is made out of it, not in the way of Molière's exaggerations, which, though extravagant, are fantastical and ludicrous, but of serious, plodding, minute prolixity. The first meeting between Morose and Epicene is well managed, and does not "o'erstep the modesty of nature," from the very restraint imposed by the situation of the parties—by the affected taciturnity of the one, and the other's singular dislike of noise. The whole story, from the beginning to the end, is a gratuitous assumption, and the height of improbability. The author, in sustaining the weight of his plot, seems like a balance-master who supports a number of people, piled one upon another, on his hands, his knees, his shoulders, but with a great effort on his own part, and with a painful effect to the beholders. The scene between Sir Amorous La Fool and Sir John Daw, in which they are frightened, by a feigned report of each other's courage, into a submission to all sorts of indignities, which they construe into flattering civilities, is the same device as that in "Twelfth Night" between Sir Andrew Aguecheek and Viola, carried to a paradoxical and revolting excess. Ben Jonson had no idea of decorum in his dramatic fictions, which Milton says is the principal thing, but went on caricaturing himself and others till he could go no farther in extravagance, and sink no lower in meanness. The titles of his *dramatis personæ*, such as Sir Amorous La Fool, Truewit, Sir John Daw, Sir Politic Would-be, &c. &c., which are significant and knowing, show his determination to overdo everything by thus letting you into their characters beforehand, and afterwards proving their pretensions by their names. Thus Peregrine, in "Volpone," says, "Your name, Sir?" Politick. "My name is Politick Would-be." To which Peregrine replies, "Oh, that speaks him." How it should, if it was his real name, and not a nickname given him

on purpose by the author, is hard to conceive. This play was Dryden's favourite. It is indeed full of sharp, biting sentences against the women, of which he was fond. The following may serve as a specimen. Truewit says, "Did I not tell thee, Dauphine? Why, all their actions are governed by crude opinion, without reason or cause; they know not why they do anything; but, as they are informed, believe, judge, praise, condemn, love, hate, and in emulation one of another, do all these things alike. Only they have a natural inclination sways 'em generally to the worst, when they are left to themselves." This is a cynical sentence; and we may say of the rest of his opinions, that "even though we should hold them to be true, yet is it slander to have them so set down." The women in this play indeed justify the author's severity; they are altogether abominable. They have an utter want of principle and decency, and are equally without a sense of pleasure, taste, or elegance. Madame Haughty, Madame Centaur, and Madame Mavis, form the College, as it is here pedantically called. They are a sort of candidates for being upon the town, but cannot find seducers, and a sort of blue-stockings, before the invention of letters. Mistress Epiceue, the silent gentlewoman, turns out not to be a woman at all; which is not a very pleasant *dénouement* of the plot, and is itself an incident apparently taken from the blundering blind-man's buff conclusion of the "Merry Wives of Windsor." What Shakespeare might introduce by an accident, and as a mere passing jest, Ben Jonson would set about building a whole play upon. The directions for making love given by Truewit, the author's favourite, discover great knowledge and shrewdness of observation, mixed with the acuteness of malice, and approach to the best style of comic dialogue. But I must refer to the play itself for them.

"Volpone, or the Fox," is his best play. It is prolix and improbable, but intense and powerful. It is written *con amore*. It is made up of cheats and

dupes, and the author is at home among them. He shows his hatred of the one and contempt for the other, and makes them set one another off to great advantage. There are several striking dramatic contrasts in this play, where the Fox lies *perdu* to watch his prey, where Mosca is the dexterous go-between, outwitting his gulls, his employer, and himself, and where each of the gaping legacy-hunters, the lawyer, the merchant, and the miser, eagerly occupied with the ridiculousness of the other's pretensions, is blind only to the absurdity of his own : but the whole is worked up too mechanically, and our credulity overstretched at last revolts into scepticism, and our attention over-tasked flags into drowsiness. This play seems formed on the model of Plautus, in unity of plot and interest ; and old Ben, in emulating his classic model, appears to have done his best. There is the same caustic, unsparing severity in it as in his other works. His patience is tried to the utmost. His words drop gall.

“Hood an ass with reverend purple,  
So you can hide his too ambitious ears,  
And he shall pass for a cathedral doctor.”

The scene between Volpone, Mosca, Voltore, Corvino, and Corbaccio, at the outset, will show the dramatic power in the conduct of this play, and will be my justification in what I have said of the literal tenaciousness (to a degree that is repulsive) of the author's imaginary descriptions.

“Every Man in his Humour” is a play well known to the public. This play acts better than it reads. The pathos in the principal character, Kitely, is “as dry as the remainder biscuit after a voyage.” There is, however, a certain good sense, discrimination, or logic of passion in the part, which affords excellent hints for an able actor, and which, if properly pointed, gives it considerable force on the stage. Bobadil is the only actually striking character in the play, or which tells equally in the closet and the theatre ; he is the real hero of the piece. His well-known pro-

posal for the pacification of Europe by killing some twenty of them, each his man a day, is as good as any other that has been suggested up to the present moment. His extravagant affectation, his blustering and cowardice, are an entertaining medley; and his final defeat and exposure, though exceedingly humorous, are the most affecting part of the story. Brainworm is a particularly dry and abstruse character. We neither know his business nor his motives: his plots are as intricate as they are useless, and as the ignorance of those he imposes upon is wonderful. This is the impression in reading it. Yet from the bustle and activity of this character on the stage, the changes of dress, the variety of affected tones and gipsy jargon, and the limping affected gestures, it is a very amusing theatrical exhibition. The rest, Master Matthew, Master Stephen, Cob, and Cob's wife, were living in the sixteenth century. That is all we all know of them. But from the very oddity of their appearance and behaviour, they have a very droll and even picturesque effect when acted. It seems a revival of the dead. We believe in their existence when we see them. As an example of the power of the stage in giving reality and interest to what otherwise would be without it, I might mention the scene in which Brainworm praises Master Stephen's leg. The folly here is insipid from its being seemingly carried to an excess, till we see it; and then we laugh the more at it, the more incredible we thought it before.

"Bartholomew Fair" is chiefly remarkable for the exhibition of odd humours and tumbler's tricks, and is on that account amusing to read once. "The Alchymist" is the most famous of this author's comedies, though I think it does not deserve its reputation. It contains all that is quaint, dreary, obsolete, and hopeless in this once famed art, but not the golden dreams and splendid disappointments. We have the mere circumstantial of the sublime science, pots and kettles, aprons and bellows, crucibles and diagrams, all the refuse and rubbish, not the

essence, the true *elixir vitae*. There is, however, one glorious scene between Surly and Sir Epicure Mammon, which is the finest example I know of dramatic sophistry, or of an attempt to prove the existence of a thing by an imposing description of its effects; but compared with this, the rest of the play is a *caput mortuum*. The scene I allude to is the following:—

“ *Mammon*. Come on, Sir. Now, you set your foot on shore  
 In *Novo Orbe*; here's the rich Peru;  
 And there, within, Sir, are the golden mines,  
 Great Solomon's Ophir! He was sailing to 't  
 Three years, but we have reached it in ten months.  
 This is the day wherein, to all my friends,  
 I will pronounce the happy word, BE RICH:  
 This day you shall be Spectatissimi.  
 You shall no more deal with the hollow dye,  
 Or the frail card. . . .

You shall start up young viceroys,  
 And have your punks and punketees, my Surly;  
 And unto thee, I speak it first, BE RICH!  
 Where is my Subtle, there? Within, oh!

*Face.* [within] Sir, he'll come to you by and by.  
*Mam.* That is his Firedrake,  
 His Lungs, his Zephyrus, he that puffs his coals,  
 Till he firk nature up in her own centre.  
 You are not faithful, Sir. This night I'll change  
 All that is metal in my house to gold;  
 And early in the morning will I send  
 To all the plumbers and the pewterers,  
 And buy their tin and lead up; and to Lothbury,  
 For all the copper.

*Surly.* What, and turn that too?  
*Mam.* Yes, and I'll purchase Devonshire and Cornwall,  
 And make them perfect Indies! You admire now?  
*Surly.* No, faith.  
*Mam.* But when you see th' effects of the great medi-  
 cine,  
 Of which one part projected on a hundred  
 Of Mercury, or Venus, or the Moon,  
 Shall turn it to as many of the Sun;  
 Nay, to a thousand, so *ad infinitum*;  
 You will believe me.  
*Surly.* Yea, when I see 't, I will.—

*Mam.* Ha ! why !

Do you think I fable with you ? I assure you,  
He that has once the flower of the Sun,  
The perfect ruby, which we call Elixir,  
Not only can do that, but, by its virtue,  
Can confer honour, love, respect, long life ;  
Give safety, valour, yea, and victory,  
To whom he will. In eight and twenty days  
I'll make an old man of fourscore a child.

*Surly.* No doubt ; he's that already.

*Mam.* Nay, I mean,

Restore his years, renew him, like an eagle,  
To the fifth age ; make him get sons and daughters,  
Young giants : as our philosophers have done,  
The ancient patriarchs, afore the flood,  
But taking, once a week, on a knife's point,  
The quantity of a grain of mustard of it ;  
Become stout Marxes, and beget young Cupids.

You are incredulous.

*Surly.* Faith, I have a humour.  
I would not willingly be gulled. Your stone  
Cannot transmute me.

*Mam.* Pertinax, my Surly,  
Will you believe antiquity's records ?  
I'll show you a book where Moses and his sister,  
And Solomon, have written of the art ;  
Ay, and a treatise penn'd by Adam—

*Surly.* How !

*Mam.* Of the philosophers' stone, and in High Dutch.

*Surly.* Did Adam write, Sir, in High Dutch ?

*Mam.* He did ;  
Which proves it was the primitive tongue.

[Enter Face, as a servant.

How now !

Do we succeed ? Is our day come, and holds it ?

*Face.* The evening will set red upon you, Sir ;  
You have colour for it, crimson ; the red ferment  
Has done his office : three hours hence prepare you  
To see projection.

*Mam.* Pertinax, my Surly,  
Again I say to thee aloud, Be rich.  
This day thou shalt have ingots, and to-morrow  
Give lords the affront. . . . Where's thy master ?

*Face.* At his prayers, Sir, he ;

Good man, he's doing his devotions  
For the success.

*Man.* Lung, I will set a period  
To all thy labours ; thou shalt be the master  
Of my seaglio . . .

For I do mean  
To have a list of wives and concubines  
Equal with Solomon : . . .

I will have all my beds blown up, not stuff :  
Down is too hard ; and then, mine oval room  
Fill'd with such pictures as Tiberius took  
From Elephantis, and dull Aretine  
But coldly imitated. Then my glasses  
Cut in more subtle angles, to disperse  
And multiply the figures as I walk. . . . My mists  
I'll have of perfumes, vapoured about the room  
To lose ourselves in ; and my baths like pits  
To fall into ; from whence we will come forth  
And roll us dry in gossamer and roses.  
Is it arriv'd at ruby ? Where I spy  
A wealthy citizen, or a rich lawyer,  
Have a sublimed pure wife, unto that fellow  
I'll send a thousand pound to be my cuckold.

*Face.* And I shall carry it ?

*Man.* No. I'll have no bawds,  
But fathers and mothers. They will do it best,  
Best of all others. And my flatterers  
Shall be the pure and gravest of divines  
That I can get for money.  
We will be brave, Puffe, now we have the medicine.  
My meat shall all come in, in Indian shells,  
Dishes of agate set in gold, and studded  
With emeralds, sapphires, hyacinths, and rubies.  
The tongues of carps, dormice, and camel's heels  
Boil'd in the spirit of Sol, and dissolv'd pearl,  
Apicius' diet, against the epilepsy ;  
And I will eat these broths with spoons of amber,  
Headed with diamond and carbuncle.  
My footboys shall eat pheasants, calver'd salmons,  
Knots, godwits, lampreys ; I myself will have  
The beards of barbels serv'd instead of salads ;  
Oil'd mushrooms ; and the swelling unctuous paps  
Of a fat pregnant sow, newly cut off,  
Drest with an exquisite and poignant sauce ;  
For which I'll say unto my cook, *There's gold,*  
*Go forth and be a knight.*

*Face.* Sir, I'll go look  
A little how it heightens.

*Mam.* Do. My shirts  
 I'll have of taffeta-sarsnet, soft and light  
 As cobwebs ; and for all my other raiment,  
 It shall be such as might provoke the Persian,  
 Were he to teach the world riot anew.  
 My gloves of fishes' and birds' skins, perfum'd  
 With gums of Paradise and eastern air.

*Surly.* And do you think to have the stone with this ?

*Mam.* No, I do think t' have all this with the stone.

*Surly.* Why, I have heard he must be *homo frugi*,  
 A pious, holy, and religious man,  
 One free from mortal sin, a very virgin,—

*Mam.* That makes it, Sir, he is so ;—but I buy it.  
 My venture brings it me. He, honest wretch,  
 A notable, superstitious, good soul,  
 Has worn his knees bare, and his slippers bald,  
 With prayer and fasting for it, and, Sir, let him  
 Do it alone, for me, still ; here he comes ;  
 Not a profane word afore him : 'tis poison."

Act ii. sc. 1.

I have only to add a few words on Beaumont and Fletcher. "Rule a Wife and Have a Wife," "The Chances," and "The Wild Goose Chase," the original of the "Inconstant," are superior in style and execution to anything of Ben Jonson's. They are, indeed, some of the best comedies on the stage ; and one proof that they are so is, that they still hold possession of it. They show the utmost alacrity of invention in contriving ludicrous distresses, and the utmost spirit in bearing up against, or impatience and irritation under them. Don John, in "The Chances," is the heroic in comedy. Leon, in "Rule a Wife and Have a Wife," is a fine exhibition of the born gentleman and natural fool : the Copper Captain is sterling to this hour : his mistress, Estifania, only died the other day with Mrs. Jordan : and the two grotesque females in the same play, act better than the Witches in "Macbeth."

## LECTURE III

## ON COWLEY, BUTLER, SUCKLING, ETHEREGE, ETC.

THE metaphysical poets or wits of the age of James and Charles I, whose style was adopted and carried to a more dazzling and fantastic excess by Cowley in the following reign, after which it declined, and gave place almost entirely to the poetry of observation and reasoning, are thus happily characterized by Dr. Johnson :—

“The metaphysical poets were men of learning, and to show their learning was their whole endeavour: but unluckily resolving to show it in rhyme, instead of writing poetry, they only wrote verses, and very often such verses as stood the trial of the finger better than of the ear; for the modulation was so imperfect, that they were only found to be verses by counting the syllables.

“If the father of criticism has rightly denominated poetry *τέχνη μητρική*, an *imitative art*, these writers will, without great wrong, lose their right to the name of poets, for they cannot be said to have imitated anything; they neither copied nature nor life; neither painted the forms of matter, nor represented the operations of intellect.”

The whole of the account is well worth reading; it was a subject for which Dr. Johnson’s powers both of thought and expression were better fitted than any other man’s. If he had had the same capacity for following the flights of a truly poetic imagination, or for feeling the finer touches of nature, that he had felicity and force in detecting and exposing the aber-

rations from the broad and beaten path of propriety and common sense, he would have amply deserved the reputation he has acquired as a philosophical critic.

The writers here referred to (such as Donne, Davies, Crashaw, and others) not merely mistook learning for poetry—they thought anything was poetry that differed from ordinary prose and the natural impression of things, by being intricate, far-fetched, and improbable. Their style was not so properly learned as metaphysical ; that is to say, whenever, by any violence done to their ideas, they could make out an abstract likeness or possible ground of comparison, they forced the image, whether learned or vulgar, into the service of the Muses. Anything would do to “hitch into a rhyme,” no matter whether striking or agreeable, or not, so that it would puzzle the reader to discover the meaning, and if there was the most remote circumstance, however trifling or vague, for the pretended comparison to hinge upon. They brought ideas together not the most, but the least like ; and of which the collision produced not light, but obscurity—served not to strengthen, but to confound. Their mystical verses read like riddles or an allegory. They neither belong to the class of lively nor severe poetry. They have not the force of the one, nor the gaiety of the other ; but are an ill-assorted, unprofitable union of the two together, applying to serious subjects that quaint and partial style of allusion which fits only what is light and ludicrous, and building the most laboured conclusions on the most fantastical and slender premises. The object of the poetry of imagination is to raise or adorn one idea by another more striking or more beautiful : the object of these writers was to match any one idea with any other idea, *for better for worse*, as we say, and whether anything was gained by the change of condition or not. The object of the poetry of the passions, again, is to illustrate any strong feeling, by showing the same feeling as connected with objects or circumstances more palpable and touching ; but here the

object was to strain and distort the immediate feeling into some barely possible consequence or recondite analogy, in which it required the utmost stretch of misapplied ingenuity to trace the smallest connection with the original impression. In short, the poetry of this period was strictly the poetry not of ideas, but of *definitions*: it proceeded in mode and figure, by *genus* and specific difference; and was the logic of the schools, or an oblique and forced construction of dry, literal matter-of-fact, decked out in a robe of glittering conceits, and clogged with the halting shackles of verse. The imagination of the writers, instead of being conversant with the face of nature, or the secrets of the heart, was lost in the labyrinths of intellectual abstraction, or entangled in the technical quibbles and impertinent intricacies of language. The complaint so often made, and here repeated, is not of the want of power in these men, but of the waste of it; not of the absence of genius, but the abuse of it. They had (many of them) great talents committed to their trust, richness of thought, and depth of feeling; but they chose to hide them (as much as they possibly could) under a false show of learning and unmeaning subtlety. From the style which they had systematically adopted, they thought nothing done till they had perverted simplicity into affectation, and spoiled nature by art. They seemed to think there was an irreconcilable opposition between genius, as well as grace and nature; tried to do without, or else constantly to thwart her; left nothing to her outward "impress," or spontaneous impulses, but made a point of twisting and torturing almost every subject they took in hand, till they had fitted it to the mould of their self-opinion and the previous fabrications of their own fancy, like those who pen acrostics in the shape of pyramids, and cut out trees into the form of peacocks. Their chief aim is to make you wonder at the writer, not to interest you in the subject; and by an incessant craving after admiration, they have lost what they might have gained with less extravagance and affectation. So Cowper, who was of a quite oppo-

site school, speaks feelingly of the misapplication of Cowley's poetical genius.

"And though reclaim'd by modern lights  
From an erroneous taste,  
I cannot but lament thy splendid wit  
Entangled in the cobwebs of the schools."

Donne, who was considerably before Cowley, is without his fancy, but was more recondite in his logic, and rigid in his descriptions. He is hence led, particularly in his satires, to tell disagreeable truths in as disagreeable a way as possible, or to convey a pleasing and affecting thought (of which there are many to be found in his other writings) by the harshest means, and with the most painful effort. His Muse suffers continual pangs and throes. His thoughts are delivered by the Cæsarean operation. The sentiments, profound and tender as they often are, are stifled in the expression; and "heaved pantingly forth," are "buried quick again" under the ruins and rubbish of analytical distinctions. It is like Poetry waking from a trance: with an eye bent idly on the outward world, and half-forgotten feelings crowding about the heart; with vivid impressions, dim notions, and disjointed words. The following may serve as instances of beautiful or impassioned reflections losing themselves in obscure and difficult applications. He has some lines to a Blossom, which begin thus:

"Little think'st thou, poor flow'r,  
Whom I have watched six or seven days,  
And seen thy birth, and seen what every hour  
Gave to thy growth, thee to this height to raise,  
And now dost laugh and triumph on this bough,  
Little think'st thou  
That it will freeze anon, and that I shall  
To-morrow find thee fall'n, or not at all."

This simple and delicate description is only intro-

duced as a foundation for an elaborate metaphysical conceit as a parallel to it, in the next stanza.

"Little think'st thou (poor heart  
 That labour'st yet to nestle thee,  
 And think'st by hovering here to get a part  
 In a forbidden or forbidding tree,  
 And hop'st her stiffness by long siege to bow :)  
 Little think'st thou,  
 That thou to-morrow, ere the sun doth wake,  
 Must with this sun and me a journey take."

This is but a lame and impotent conclusion from so delightful a beginning. He thus notices the circumstance of his wearing his late wife's hair about his arm, in a little poem which is called the Funeral :

"Whoever comes to shroud me, do not harm  
 Nor question much  
 That subtle wreath of hair, about mine arm ;  
 The mystery, the sign you must not touch."

The scholastic reason he gives quite dissolves the charm of tender and touching grace in the sentiment itself

"For 'tis my outward soul,  
 Viceroy to that, which unto heaven being gone,  
 Will leave this to control,  
 And keep these limbs, her provinces, from dissolution."

Again, the following lines, the title of which is "Love's Deity," are highly characteristic of this author's manner, in which the thoughts are inlaid in a costly but imperfect mosaic-work.

"I long to talk with some old lover's ghost,  
 Who died before the God of Love was born ;  
 I cannot think that he, who then lov'd most,  
 Sunk so low, as to love one which did scorn.  
 But since this God produc'd a destiny,  
 And that vice-nature, custom, lets it be ;  
 I must love her that loves not me."

The stanza in the "Epithalamion on a Count Palatine of the Rhine," has been often quoted against

him, and is an almost irresistible illustration of the extravagances to which this kind of writing, which turns upon a pivot of words and possible allusions, is liable. Speaking of the bride and bridegroom he says, by way of serious compliment—

“Here lies a she-Sun, and a he-Moon there,  
She gives the best light to his sphere;  
Or each is both and all, and so  
They unto one another nothing owe.”

His love-verses and epistles to his friends give the most favourable idea of Donne. His satires are too clerical. He shows, if I may so speak, too much disgust, and, at the same time, too much contempt for vice. His dogmatical invectives hardly redeem the nauseousness of his descriptions, and compromise the imagination of his readers more than they assist their reason. The satirist does not write with the same authority as the divine, and should use his poetical privileges more sparingly. “To the pure all things are pure,” is a maxim which a man like Dr. Donne may be justified in applying to himself; but he might have recollect ed that it could not be construed to extend to the generality of his readers, *without benefit of clergy*.

Bishop Hall’s Satires are coarse railing in verse, and hardly that. Pope has, however, contrived to avail himself of them in some of his imitations.

Sir John Davies is the author of a poem on the Soul, and of one on Dancing. In both he shows great ingenuity, and sometimes terseness and vigour. In the last of these two poems his fancy *pirouettes* in a very lively and agreeable manner, but something too much in the style of a French opera-dancer, with sharp angular turns, and repeated deviations from the faultless line of simplicity and nature.

Crashaw was a writer of the same ambitious stamp, whose imagination was rendered still more inflammable by the fervours of fanaticism, and who having been

converted from Protestantism to Popery (a weakness to which the "seething brains" of the poets of this period were prone) by some visionary appearance of the Virgin Mary, poured out his devout raptures and zealous enthusiasm in a torrent of poetical hyperboles. The celebrated Latin epigram on the miracle of our Saviour, "The water blushed into wine," is in his usual *hectic* mauner. His translation of the contest between the Musician and the Nightingale is the best specimen of his powers.

Davenant's "Gondibert" is a tissue of stanzas, all aiming to be wise and witty, each containing something in itself, and the whole together amounting to nothing. The thoughts separately require so much attention to understand them, and arise so little out of the narrative, that they with difficulty sink into the mind, and have no common feeling of interest to recall or link them together afterwards. The general style may be judged of by these two memorable lines in the description of the skeleton-chamber.

" Yet on that wall hangs he too, who so thought,  
And she dried by him whom that he obeyed."

Mr. Hobbes, in a prefatory discourse, has thrown away a good deal of powerful logic and criticism in the recommendation of the plan of his friend's poem. Davenant, who was poet-laureate to Charles II, wrote several masques and plays which were well received in his time, but have not come down with equal applause to us.

Marvel (on whom I have already bestowed such praise as I could, for elegance and tenderness in his descriptive poems) in his satires and witty pieces was addicted to the affected and involved style here reprobated, as in his "Flecknoe" (the origin of Dryden's "Macflecknoe") and in his satire on the Dutch. As an instance of this forced, far-fetched method of treating his subject, he says, in ridicule of the Hollanders,

that when their dykes overflowed, the fish used to come to table with them,

"And sat not as a meat, but as a guest."

There is a poem of Marvel's on the death of King Charles I, which I have not seen, but which I have heard praised by one whose praise is never high but of the highest things, for the beauty and pathos, as well as the generous frankness of the sentiments, coming, as they did, from a determined and incorruptible political foe.

Shadwell was a successful and voluminous dramatic writer of much the same period. His "Libertine" (taken from the celebrated Spanish story) is full of spirit; but it is the spirit of licentiousness and impiety. At no time do there appear to have been such extreme speculations afloat on the subject of religion and morality, as there were shortly after the Reformation, and afterwards under the Stuarts, the differences being widened by political irritation; and the Puritans often over-acting one extreme out of grimace and hypocrisy, as the king's party did the other out of *bravado*.

Carew is excluded from his pretensions to the laureateship in Suckling's "Sessions of the Poets," on account of his slowness. His verses are delicate and pleasing, with a certain feebleness, but with very little tincture of the affectation of this period. His masque (called "*Cælum Britannicum*") in celebration of a marriage at court, has not much wit or fancy, but the accompanying prose directions and commentary on the mythological story, are written with wonderful facility and elegance, in a style of familiar dramatic dialogue approaching nearer the writers of Queen Anne's reign than those of Queen Elizabeth's.

Milton's name is included by Dr. Johnson in the list of metaphysical poets on no better authority than his lines on Hobson the Cambridge Carrier, which he acknowledges were the only ones Milton wrote on this model. Indeed, he is the great contrast to that style of poetry, being remarkable for breadth and massiness,

or what Dr. Johnson calls "aggregation of ideas," beyond almost any other poet. He has in this respect been compared to Michael Angelo, but not with much reason : his verses are

— “inimitable on earth  
By model, or by shading pencil drawn.”

Suckling is also ranked, without sufficient warrant, among the metaphysical poets. Sir John was "of the court, courtly"; and his style almost entirely free from the charge of pedantry and affectation. There are a few blemishes of this kind in his works, but they are but few. His compositions are almost all of them short and lively effusions of wit and gallantry, written in a familiar but spirited style, without much design or effort. His shrewd and taunting address to a desponding lover will sufficiently vouch for the truth of this account of the general cast of his best pieces.

" Why so pale and wan, fond lover ?  
Pr'ythee why so pale ?  
Will, when looking well can't move her,  
Looking ill prevail ?  
Pr'ythee why so pale ?

Why so dull and mute, young sinner ?  
Pr'ythee why so mute ?  
Will, when speaking well, can't win her,  
Saying nothing do't ?  
Pr'ythee why so mute ?

Quit, quit for shame, this will not move,  
This cannot take her ;  
If of herself she will not love,  
Nothing can make her ;  
The Devil take her."

The two short poems against Fruition, that beginning, "There never yet was woman made, nor shall, but to be curst,"—the song, "I pr'ythee, spare me gentle boy, Press me no more for that slight toy, That foolish trifle of a heart,"—another, "Tis now, since

I sat down before That foolish fort, a heart,"—*Lutea Alanson*—the set of similes, "Hast thou seen the down in the air, When wanton winds have tost it,"—and his "Dream," which is of a more tender and romantic cast, are all exquisite in their way. They are the origin of the style of Prior and Gay in their short fugitive verses, and of the songs in the "Beggar's Opera." His "Ballad on a Wedding" is his masterpiece, and is indeed unrivalled in that class of composition, for the voluptuous delicacy of the sentiments, and the luxuriant richness of the images. I wish I could repeat the whole, but that, from the change of manners, is impossible. The description of the bride is (half of it) as follows: the story is supposed to be told by one countryman to another:—

" Her finger was so small, the ring  
Would not stay on, which they did bring ;  
It was too wide a peck :  
And to say truth (for out it must)  
It look'd like the great collar (just)  
About our young colt's neck.

Her feet beneath her petticoat,  
Like little mice, stole in and out,  
As if they feared the light ;  
But oh ! she dances such a way !  
No sun upon an Easter-day  
Is half so fine a sight.

• • • • •  
Her cheeks so rare a white was on  
No daisy makes comparison  
(Who sees them is undone),  
For streaks of red were mingled there,  
Such as are on a Cath'rine pear,  
(The side that's next the sun).

Her lips were red ; and one was thin,  
Compar'd to that was next her chin ;  
(Some bee had stung it newly)  
But (Dick) her eyes so guard her face,  
I durst no more upon them gaze,  
Than on the sun in July.

Her mouth so small, when she does speak,  
Thou'dst swear her teeth her words did break,  
That they might passage get;  
But she so handled still the matter,  
They came as good as ours, or better,  
And are not spent a whit."

There is to me in the whole of this delightful performance a freshness and purity like the first breath of morning. Its sportive irony never trespasses on modesty, though it sometimes (laughing) threatens to do so! Suckling's Letters are full of habitual gaiety and good sense. His "Discourse on Reason in Religion" is well enough meant. Though he excelled in the conversational style of poetry, writing verse with the freedom and readiness, vivacity and unconcern, with which he would have talked on the most familiar and sprightly topics, his peculiar powers deserted him in attempting dramatic dialogue. His comedy of the "Goblins" is equally defective in plot, wit, and nature; it is a wretched list of *exits* and *entrances*, and the whole business of the scene is taken up in the unaccountable seizure, and equally unaccountable escapes, of a number of persons from a band of robbers in the shape of Goblins, who turn out to be noblemen and gentlemen in disguise. Suckling was not a Grub Street author; or it might be said, that this play is like what he might have written after dreaming all night of duns and a sponging house. His tragedies are no better: their titles are the most interesting part of them, "Aglaura," "Brennoralt," and "The Sad One."

Cowley had more brilliancy of fancy and ingenuity of thought than Donne, with less pathos and sentiment. His mode of illustrating his ideas differs also from Donne's in this—that whereas Donne is contented to analyse an image into its component elements, and resolve it into its most abstracted species, Cowley first does this, indeed, but does not stop till he has fixed upon some other prominent example of the same general class of ideas, and forced them into a meta-

phorical union, by the medium of the generic definition. Thus he says—

"The Phœnix Pindar is a vast species alone."

He means to say that he stands by himself; he is then "a vast species alone": then by applying to this generality the *principium individuationis*, he becomes a Phœnix, because the Phœnix is the only example of a species contained in an individual. Yet this is only a literal or metaphysical coincidence; and literally and metaphysically speaking, Pindar was not a species by himself, but only seemed so by pre-eminence or excellence; that is, from qualities of mind appealing to and absorbing the imagination, and which, therefore, ought to be represented in poetical language by some other obvious and palpable image, exhibiting the same kind or degree of excellence in other things, as when Gray compares him to the Theban eagle,

"Sailing with supreme dominion  
Through the azure deep of air."

Again, he talks in the "Motto," or invocation to his Muse, of "marching the Muse's Hannibal" into undiscovered regions. That is, he thinks first of being a leader in poetry, and then he immediately, by virtue of this abstraction, becomes a Hannibal; though no two things can really be more unlike, in all the associations belonging to them, than a leader of armies and a leader of the tuneful nine. In like manner, he compares Bacon to Moses; for in *his* verses extremes are sure to meet. The "Hymn to Light," which forms a perfect contrast to Milton's "Invocation to Light," in the commencement of the third book of "Paradise Lost," begins in the following manner:—

"First-born of Chaos, who so fair didst come  
From the old negro's darksome womb!  
Which, when it saw the lovely child,  
The melancholy mass put on kind looks, and smil'd."

And soon after—

" 'Tis, I believe, this archery to show  
 That so much cost in colours thou,  
 And skill in painting, dost bestow,  
 Upon thy ancient arms, the gaudy heav'nly bow.

Swift as light thoughts their empty career run,  
 Thy race is finished when begun ;  
 Let a post-angel start with thee,  
 And thou the goal of earth shalt reach as soon as he."

The conceits here are neither wit nor poetry ; but a burlesque upon both, made up of a singular metaphorical jargon, verbal generalities, and physical analogies. Thus his calling Chaos, or Darkness, "the old negro," would do for abuse or jest, but is too remote and degrading for serious poetry, and yet it is meant for such. The "old negro" is at best a nickname, and the smile on its face loses its beauty in such company. The making out the rainbow to be a species of heraldic painting, and converting an angel into a post-boy, show the same rage for comparison ; but such comparisons are as odious as they are unjust. Dr. Johnson has multiplied instances of the same false style in its various divisions and subdivisions.<sup>1</sup> Of Cowley's serious poems, the "Complaint" is the one I like the best ; and some of his translations in the Essays, as those on "Liberty" and "Retirement," are exceedingly good. The Odes to Vandyke, to the Royal Society, to Hobbes, and to the latter Brutus, beginning "Excellent Brutus," are all full of ingenious and high thoughts, impaired by a load of ornament and quaint disguises. The "Chronicle, or List of his Mistresses," is the best of his original lighter pieces ; but the best of his poems are the translations from Anacreon, which remain, and are likely to remain, unrivalled. The spirit of wine and joy circulates in them ; and though they are lengthened

<sup>1</sup> See his "Lives of the British Poets," vol. I.

out beyond the originals, it is by fresh impulses of an eager and inexhaustible feeling of delight. Here are some of them :—

## DRINKING.

"The thirsty earth sucks up the rain,  
And drinks, and gapes for drink again.  
The plants suck in the earth, and are  
With constant drinking fresh and fair.  
The sea itself, which one would think  
Should have but little need of drink,  
Drinks twice ten thousand rivers up,  
So full that they overflow the cup.  
The busy sun (and one would guess  
By a drunken fiery face no less)  
Drinks up the sea, and, when he's done,  
The moon and stars drink up the sun.  
They drink and dance by their own light,  
They drink and revel all the night.  
Nothing in nature's sober found,  
But an eternal health goes round.  
Fill up the bowl then, till it high,  
Fill all the glasses there, for why  
Should every creature drink but I;  
Why, man of morals, tell me why!"

This is a classical intoxication ; and the poet's imagination, giddy with fancied joys, communicates its spirit and its motion to inanimate things, and makes all nature reel round with it. It is not easy to decide between these choice pieces, which may be reckoned among the *delights of human kind* ; but that to the Grasshopper is one of the happiest as well as most serious :—

"Happy insect, what can be  
In happiness compar'd to thee ?  
Fed with nourishment divine,  
The dewy morning's gentle wine !  
Nature waits upon thee still,  
And thy verdant cup does fill,  
'Tis filled wherever thou dost tread,  
Nature's self thy Ganymede.

Thou dost drink, and dance, and sing ;  
Happier than the happiest king !  
All the fields which thou dost see,  
All the plants, belong to thee ;  
All that summer-hours produce,  
Fertile made with early juice.

Man for thee does sow and plough,  
Farmer he, and landlord thou !  
Thou dost innocently joy ;  
Nor does thy luxury destroy ;  
The shepherd gladly heareth thee,  
More harmonious than he.

Thee country hinds with gladness hear,  
Prophet of the ripen'd year !  
Thee Phœbus loves, and does inspire ;  
Phœbus is himself thy sire.

To thee, of all things upon earth,  
Life is no longer than thy mirth.  
Happy insect, happy thou !  
Dost neither age nor winter know ;  
But, when thou'rt drunk, and danc'd, and sung  
Thy fill the flowery leaves among,  
(Voluptuous and wise withal,  
Epicurean animal !)  
Sated with thy summer feast,  
Thou retir'st to endless rest."

Cowley's Essays are among the most agreeable prose compositions in our language, being equally recommended by sense, wit, learning, and interesting personal history, and written in a style quite free from the faults of his poetry. It is a pity that he did not cultivate his talent for prose more, and write less in verse, for he was clearly a man of more reflection than imagination. The Essays on Agriculture, on Liberty, on Solitude, and on Greatness, are all of them delightful. From the last I may give his account of Senecio as an addition to the instances of the ludicrous, which I have attempted to enumerate in the introductory Lecture ; whose ridiculous affectation of grandeur Seneca the elder (he tells us) describes to this effect : "Senecio was a man of a turbid and confused

wit, who could not endure to speak any but mighty words and sentences, till this humour grew at last into so notorious a habit, or rather disease, as became the sport of the whole town : he would have no servants, but huge, massy fellows ; no plate or household stuff, but thrice as big as the fashion : you may believe me, for I speak it without raillery, his extravagancy came at last into such a madness, that he would not put on a pair of shoes, each of which was not big enough for both his feet ; he would eat nothing but what was great, nor touch any fruit but horse-plums and pound-pears ; he kept a mistress that was a very giantess, and made her walk too always in chiopins, till at last he got the surname of Senecio Grandio." This was certainly the most absurd person we read of in antiquity. Cowley's character of Oliver Cromwell, which is intended as a satire (though it certainly produces a very different impression on the mind), may vie for truth of outline and force of colouring with the masterpieces of the Greek and Latin historians. It may serve as a contrast to the last extract. "What can be more extraordinary than that a person of mean birth, no fortune, no eminent qualities of body, which have sometimes, or of mind, which have often, raised men to the highest dignities, should have the courage to attempt, and the happiness to succeed in, so improbable a design as the destruction of one of the most ancient and most solidly-founded monarchies upon the earth ? That he should have the power or boldness to put his prince and master to an open and infamous death ; to banish that numerous and strongly-allied family ; to do all this under the name and wages of a Parliament ; to trample upon them too as he pleased, and spurn them out of doors when he grew weary of them ; to raise up a new and unheard-of monster out of their ashes ; to stifle that in the very infancy, and set up himself above all things that ever were called sovereign in England ; to oppress all his enemies by arms, and all his friends afterwards by artifice ; to serve all parties patiently for a while, and

to command them victoriously at last ; to overrun each corner of the three nations, and overcome with equal facility both the riches of the south and the poverty of the north ; to be feared and courted by all foreign princes, and adopted a brother to the gods of the earth ; to call together Parliaments with a word of his pen, and scatter them again with the breath of his mouth ; to be humbly and daily petitioned that he would please to be hired, at the rate of two millions a year, to be the master of those who had hired him before to be their servant ; to have the estates and lives of three kingdoms as much at his disposal as was the little inheritance of his father, and to be as noble and liberal in the spending of them ; and lastly (for there is no end of all the particulars of his glory), to bequeath all this with one word to his posterity ; to die with peace at home, and triumph abroad ; to be buried among kings, and with more than regal solemnity ; and to leave a name behind him, not to be extinguished, but with the whole world ; which, as it is now too little for his praises, so might have been too for his conquests, if the short line of his human life could have been stretched out to the extent of his immortal designs ? ”

Cowley has left one comedy, called “Cutter of Coleman Street,” which met with an unfavourable reception at the time, and is now (not undeservedly) forgotten. It contains, however, one good scene, which is rich both in fancy and humour, that between the puritanical bride, Tabitha, and her ranting royalist husband. It is said that this play was originally composed, and afterwards revived, as a satire upon the Presbyterian party ; yet it was resented by the court party as a satire upon itself. A man must, indeed, be sufficiently blind with party-prejudice, to have considered this as a compliment to his own side of the question. “ Call you this backing of your friends ? ” The cavaliers are in this piece represented as reduced to the lowest shifts in point of fortune, and sunk still lower in point of principle.

The greatest single production of wit of this period, I might say of this country, is Butler's "Hudibras." It contains specimens of every variety of drollery and satire, and those specimens crowded together into almost every page. The proof of this is, that nearly one half of his lines are got by heart, and quoted for mottoes. In giving instances of different sorts of wit, or trying to recollect good things of this kind, they are the first which stand ready in the memory; and they are those which furnish the best tests and most striking illustrations of what we want. Dr. Campbell, in his "Philosophy of Rhetoric," when treating of the subject of wit, which he has done very neatly and sensibly, has constant recourse to two authors, Pope and Butler, the one for ornament, the other more for use. Butler is equally in the hands of the learned and the vulgar, for the sense is generally as solid as the images are amusing and grotesque. Whigs and Tories join in his praise. He could not, in spite of himself,

"narrow his mind,  
And to party give up what was meant for mankind."

Though his subject was local and temporary, his fame was not circumscribed within his own age. He was admired by Charles II and has been rewarded by posterity. It is the poet's fate! It is not, perhaps, to be wondered at, that arbitrary and worthless monarchs like Charles II should neglect those who pay court to them. The idol (if it had sense) would despise its worshippers. Indeed, Butler hardly merited anything on the score of loyalty to the house of Stuart. True wit is not a parasite plant. The strokes which it aims at folly and knavery on one side of a question, tell equally home on the other. Dr. Zachary Grey, who added notes to the poem, and abused the leaders of Cromwell's party by name, would be more likely to have gained a pension for his services than Butler, who was above such petty work. A poem like "Hudibras" could not be *made to order of a court*. Charles might very well have reproached the author with wanting to

show his own wit and sense rather than to favour a tottering cause ; and he has even been suspected, in parts of his poem, of glancing at majesty itself. He in general ridicules not persons, but things, not a party, but their principles, which may belong, as time and occasion serve, to one set of solemn pretenders or another. This he has done most effectually, in every possible way, and from every possible source, learned or unlearned. He has exhausted the moods and figures of satire and sophistry.<sup>1</sup> It would be possible to deduce the different forms of syllogism in Aristotle, from the different violations or mock-imitations of them in Butler. He fulfils every one of Barrow's conditions of wit, which I have enumerated in the first Lecture. He makes you laugh or smile by comparing the high to the low,<sup>2</sup> or by pretending to raise the low to the lofty ;<sup>3</sup> he succeeds equally in the familiarity of his illustrations,<sup>4</sup> or their incredible extravagance,<sup>5</sup> by

<sup>1</sup> " And have not two saints power to use  
A greater privilege than three Jews ? "

• • • •

Her voice the music of the spheres,  
So loud it deafens mortals' ears.  
As wise philosophers have thought,  
And that's the cause we hear it not."

<sup>2</sup> " No Indian prince has to his palace  
More followers than a thief to the gallows."

<sup>3</sup> " And in his nose, like Indian king,  
He (Bruin) wore for ornament a ring."

<sup>4</sup> " Whose noise whets valour sharp, like beer  
By thunder turned to vinegar."

<sup>5</sup> " Replete with strange hermetic powder,  
That wounds nine miles point-blank would solder.

• • • •

His tawny beard was th' equal grace  
Both of his wisdom and his face ;  
In cut and die so like a tile,  
A sudden view it would beguile :

comparing things that are alike or not alike. He surprises equally by his coincidences or contradictions, by spinning out a long-winded flimsy excuse, or by turning short upon you with the point-blank truth. His rhymes are as witty as his reasons, equally remote from what common custom would suggest;<sup>1</sup> and he startles you sometimes by an empty sound like a blow upon a drum-head,<sup>2</sup> by a pun upon one word,<sup>3</sup> and by splitting another in two at the end of a verse, with the same alertness and power over the odd and unaccountable in the combinations of sounds as of images.<sup>4</sup>

There are as many shrewd aphorisms in his works, clenched by as many quaint and individual allusions, as perhaps in any author whatever. He makes none but palpable hits, that may be said to give one's

The upper part thereof was whey,  
 The nether orange mixed with grey.  
 This hairy meteor did denounce  
 The fall of sceptres and of crowns ;  
 With grisly type did represent  
 Declining age of government ;  
 And tell with hieroglyphic spade  
 Its own grave and the state's were made.

This sword a dagger had his page,  
 That was but little for his age ;  
 And therefore waited on him so,  
 As dwarfs upon knight errants do."

<sup>1</sup> "And straight another with his flambeau  
 Gave Ralph o'er the eyes a damn'd blow.

That deals in destiny's dark counsels,  
 And sage opinions of the moon sells."

<sup>2</sup> "The mighty Tottipottimoy  
 Sent to our elders an envoy."

<sup>3</sup> "For Hebrew roots, although they're found  
 To flourish most in barren ground."

<sup>4</sup> "Those wholesale critics that in coffee-  
 Houses cry down all philosophy."

understanding a rap on the knuckles.<sup>1</sup> He is, indeed, sometimes too prolific, and spins his antithetical sentences out, one after another, till the reader, not the author, is wearied. He is, however, very seldom guilty of repetitions, or wordy paraphrases of himself; but he sometimes comes rather too near it, and interrupts the thread of his argument (for narrative he has none) by a tissue of epigrams, and the tagging of points and conundrums without end. The fault, or original sin of his genius, is, that from too much leaven it ferments and runs over; and there is, unfortunately, nothing in his subject to restrain and keep it within compass. He has no story good for anything, and his characters are good for very little. They are too low and mechanical, or too much one thing, personifications, as it were, of nicknames, and bugbears of popular prejudice and vulgar cant, unredeemed by any virtue, or difference or variety of disposition. There is no relaxation or shifting of the parts; and the impression in some degree fails of its effect, and becomes questionable from its being always the same. The satire looks, at length, almost like special pleading; it has nothing to confirm it in the apparent good humour or impartiality of the writer. It is something revolting to see an author persecute his characters, the cherished offspring of his brain, in this manner, without mercy. Hudibras and Ralph have immortalized Butler; and what has he done for them in return, but set them up to be "pilloried on infamy's high and lasting stage"? This is ungrateful!

The rest of the characters have, in general, little more than their names and professions to distinguish them. We scarcely know one from another, Cerdon, or Orsin, or Crowdero, and are often obliged to turn back, to connect their several adventures together. In fact, Butler drives only at a *sect of obnoxious*

<sup>1</sup> "This we among ourselves may speak,  
But to the wicked or the weak,  
We must be cautious to declare  
Perfection-truths, such as these are."

opinions, and runs into general declamations. His poem in its essence is a satire, or didactic poem. It is not virtually dramatic or narrative. It is composed of digressions by the author. He instantly breaks off in the middle of a story, or incident, to comment upon and turn it into ridicule. He does not give characters but topics, which would do just as well in his own mouth without agents, or machinery of any kind. The long digression in Part III., in which no mention is made of the hero, is just as good and as much an integrant part of the poem as the rest. The conclusion is lame and impotent, but that is saying nothing ; the beginning and middle are equally so as to historical merit. There is no keeping in his characters, as in *Don Quixote* ; nor any enjoyment of the ludicrousness of their situations, as in *Hogarth*. Indeed, it requires a considerable degree of sympathy to enter into and describe to the life even the ludicrous eccentricities of others, and there is no appearance of sympathy or liking to his subject in *Butler*. His humour is to his wit, "as one grain of wheat in a bushel of chaff : you shall search all day, and when you find it, it is not worth the trouble." Yet there are exceptions. The most decisive is, I think, the description of the battle between Bruin and his foes, Part I. Canto iii., and again of the triumphal procession in Part II. Canto ii., of which the principal features are copied in *Hogarth's election print, the Chairing of the Successful Candidate*. The account of Sidrophel and Whackum is another instance, and there are some few others, but rarely sprinkled up and down.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The following are nearly all I can remember :—

" Thus stopp'd their fury and the basting  
Which towards Hudibras was hasting."

It is said of the bear, in the fight with the dogs—

" And setting his right foot before,  
He raised himself to show how tall  
His person was above them all.

The widow, the termagant heroine of the poem, is still more disagreeable than her lover : and her sarcastic account of the passion of love, as consisting entirely in an attachment to land and houses, goods and chattels, which is enforced with all the rhetoric the author is master of, and hunted down through endless similes, is evidently false. The vulgarity and meanness of sentiment which Butler complains of in the Presbyterians, seems at last, from long familiarity and close contemplation, to have tainted his own mind. Their worst vices appear to have taken root in his imagination.

At this the knight grew high in chafe,  
And staring furiously on Ralph,  
He trembled and look'd pale with ire,  
Like ashes first, then red as fire.

. . . . .  
The knight himself did after ride,  
Leading Crowdero by his side,  
And tow'd him if he lagged behind,  
Like boat against the tide and wind."

. . . . .  
" And raised upon his desperate foot,  
On stirrup-side he gazed about.

. . . . .  
And Hudibras, who used to ponder  
On such sights with judicious wonder."

The beginning of the account of the procession in Part II. is as follows :—

" Both thought it was the wisest course  
To wave the fight and mount to horse,  
And to secure, by swift retreating,  
Themselves from danger of worse beating :  
Yet neither of them would disparage  
By uttering of his mind his courage.  
Which made 'em stoutly keep their ground,  
With horror and disdain wind-bound.  
And now the cause of all their fear  
By slow degrees approached so near,  
They might distinguish different noise  
Of horns and pans, and dogs and boys,  
And kettle-drums, whose sullen dub  
Sounds like the hooping of a tub."

Nothing but what was selfish and grovelling sunk into his memory, in the depression of a menial situation under his supposed hero. He has, indeed, carried his private grudge too far into his general speculations. He even makes out the rebels to be cowards and well beaten, which does not accord with the history of the times. In an excess of zeal for Church and State, he is too much disposed to treat religion as a cheat and liberty as a farce. It was the cant of that day (from which he is not free) to cry down sanctity and sobriety as marks of disaffection, as it is the cant of this to hold them up as proofs of loyalty and staunch monarchical principles. Religion and morality are, in either case, equally made subservient to the spirit of party, and a stalking-horse to the love of power. Finally, there is a want of pathos and humour, but no want of interest in "Hudibras." It is difficult to lay it down. One thought is inserted into another ; the links in the chain of reasoning are so closely riveted, that the attention seldom flags, but is kept alive (without any other assistance) by the mere force of writing. There are occasional indications of poetical fancy, and an eye for natural beauty ; but these are kept under or soon discarded, judiciously enough, but it should seem, not for lack of power, for they are certainly as masterly as they are rare. Such is the burlesque description of the stocks, or allegorical prison, in which first Crowdero and then Hudibras are confined : the passage beginning—

"As when an owl that's in a barn,  
Sees a mouse creeping in the corn,  
Sits still and shuts his round blue eyes,  
As if he slept," &c.

And the description of the moon going down in the early morning, which is as pure, original, and picturesque as possible :—

"The queen of night, whose large command  
Rules all the sea and half the land,  
And over moist and crazy brains  
In high spring-tides at midnight reigns,  
Was now declining to the west,  
To go to bed and take her rest."

Butler is sometimes scholastic, but he makes his learning tell to good account ; and for the purposes of burlesque nothing can be better fitted than the scholastic style.

Butler's "Remains" are nearly as good and full of sterling genius as his principal poem. Take the following ridicule of the plan of the Greek tragedies as an instance :

"Reduce all tragedy, by rules of art,  
Back to its ancient theatre, a cart,  
And make them henceforth keep the beaten roads  
Of reverond chorues and episodes ;  
Reform and regulate a puppet-play,  
According to the true and ancient way ;  
That not an actor shall presume to squeak  
Unless he have a license for 't in Greek ;  
Nor devil in the puppet-play be allowed  
To roar and spit fire, but to fright the crowd,  
Unless some god or demon chance to have piques  
Against an ancient family of Greeks ;  
That other men may tremble and take warning  
How such a fatal progeny they're born in ;  
For none but such for tragedy are fitted  
That have been ruined only to be pitied ;  
And only those held proper to deter  
Who have th' ill luck against their wills to err ;  
Whence only such as are of middling sizes,  
Betwixt morality and venial vices,  
Are qualified to be destroyed by fate,  
For other mortals to take warning at."

*Upon Critics.*

His ridicule of Milton's Latin style is equally severe, but not so well founded.

I have only to add a few words respecting the dramatic writers about this time, before we arrive at the golden period of our comedy. Those of Etherege<sup>1</sup> are good for nothing, except "The Man of Mode," or "Sir Fopling Flutter," which is, I think, a more exquisite and airy picture of the manners of that age than any other extant. Sir Fopling himself is an inimitable

<sup>1</sup> "Love in a Tub," and "She Would if She Could."

coxcomb, but pleasant withal He is a suit of clothes personified Dorimant (supposed to be Lord Rochester) is the genius of grace, gallantry, and gaiety The women in this courtly play have very much the look and air (but something more demure and significant) of Sir Peter Lely's beauties Harriet, the mistress of Dorimant, who "tames his wild heart to her loving hand," is the flower of the piece Her natural, untutored grace and spirit, her meeting with Dorimant in the Park, bowing and mimicking him, and the luxuriant description which is given of her fine person, altogether form one of the *chef's d'œuvre* of dramatic painting I should think this comedy would bear reviving , and if Mr Liston were to play Sir Fopling, the part would shine out with double lustre, "like the morn risen on mid-noon" Dryden's comedies have all the point that there is in ribaldry, and all the humour that there is in extravagance I am sorry I can say nothing better of them He was not at home in this kind of writing, of which he was himself conscious His play was *horse-play* His wit (what there is of it) is ingenious and scholar-like, rather than natural and dramatic Thus Burr, in the "Wild Gallant, says to Failer, "She shall sooner cut an atom than part us" His plots are pure *voluntaries* in absurdity, that bend and shift to his purpose without any previous notice or reason, and are governed by final causes "Sir Martin Marall," which was taken from the Duchess of Newcastle, is the best of his plays, and the origin of the "Busy Body" Otway's comedies do no sort of credit to him on the contrary, they are as desperate as his fortunes The Duke of Buckingham's famous "Rehearsal," which has made, and deservedly, so much noise in the world, is in a great measure taken from Beaumont and Fletcher's "Knight of the Burning Pestle," which was written in ridicule of the London apprentices in the reign of Elizabeth, who had a great hand in the critical decisions of that age There were other dramatic writers of this period, noble and plebeian I shall only mention one other piece, the "Committee," I believe by Sir Robert

Howard, which has of late been cut down into the farce called "Honest Thieves," and which I remember reading with a great deal of pleasure many years ago.

One cause of the difference between the immediate reception and lasting success of dramatic works at this period may be, that after the Court took the play-houses under its particular protection, everything became very much an affair of private patronage. If an author could get a learned lord or a countess-dowager to bespeak a box at his play, and applaud the doubtful passages, he considered his business as done. On the other hand, there was a reciprocity between men of letters and their patrons; critics were "mitigated into courtiers, and submitted," as Mr. Burke has it, "to the soft collar of social esteem," in pronouncing sentence on the works of lords and ladies. How ridiculous this seems now! What a hubbub it would create if it were known that a particular person of fashion and title had taken a front box in order to decide on the fate of a first play! How the newspaper critics would laugh in their sleeves! How the public would sneer! But at this time there was no public. I will not say, therefore, that these times are better than those; but they are better, I think, in this respect. An author nowadays no longer hangs dangling on the frown of a lord, or the smile of a lady of quality (the one governed perhaps by his valet, and the other by her waiting-maid), but throws himself boldly, making a lover's leap of it, into the broad lap of public opinion, on which he falls like a feather-bed; and which, like the great bed of Ware, is wide enough to hold us all very comfortably!

## LECTURE IV

ON WYCHERLEY, CONGREVE, VANBRUGH,  
AND FARQUHAR

COMEDY is a “graceful ornament to the civil order; the Corinthian capital of polished society.” Like the mirrors which have been added to the sides of one of our theatres, it reflects the images of grace, of gaiety, and pleasure double, and completes the perspective of human life. To read a good comedy is to keep the best company in the world, where the best things are said, and the most amusing happen. The wittiest remarks are always ready on the tongue, and the luckiest occasions are always at hand to give birth to the happiest conceptions. Sense makes strange havoc of nonsense. Refinement acts as a foil to affectation, and affectation to ignorance. Sentence after sentence tells. We don’t know which to admire most, the observation or the answer to it. We would give our fingers to be able to talk so ourselves, or to hear others talk so. In turning over the pages of the best comedies, we are almost transported to another world, and escape from this dull age to one that was all life, and whim, and mirth, and humour. The curtain rises, and a gayer scene presents itself, as on the canvas of Watteau. We are admitted behind the scenes like spectators at Court, on a levee or birthday; but it is the Court, the gala day of wit and pleasure, of gallantry and Charles II! What an air breathes from the name! what a rustling of silks and waving of plumes! what a sparkling of diamond ear-rings and shoe-buckles! What bright eyes (ah, those were Waller’s Sacharissa’s as she

passed!), what killing looks and graceful motions! How the faces of the whole ring are dressed in smiles! how the repartee goes round! how wit and folly, elegance and awkward imitation of it, set one another off! Happy, thoughtless age, when king and nobles led purely ornamental lives; when the utmost stretch of a morning's study went no farther than the choice of a sword-knot, or the adjustment of a side-curl; when the soul spoke out in all the pleasing eloquence of dress; and beaux and belles, enamoured of themselves in one another's follies, fluttered like gilded butterflies, in giddy mazes, through the walks of St. James's Park!

The four principal writers of this style of comedy (which I think the best) are undoubtedly Wycherley, Congreve, Vanbrugh, and Farquhar. The dawn was in Etherege, as its latest close was in Sheridan.—It is hard to say which of these four is best, or in what each of them excels, they had so many and such great excellences.

Congreve is the most distinct from the others, and the most easily defined, both from what he possessed, and from what he wanted. He had by far the most wit and elegance, with less of other things, of humour, character, incident, &c. His style is inimitable, nay perfect. It is the highest model of comic dialogue. Every sentence is replete with sense and satire, conveyed in the most polished and pointed terms. Every page presents a shower of brilliant conceits, is a tissue of epigrams in prose, is a new triumph of wit, a new conquest over dullness. The fire of artful raillery is nowhere else so well kept up. This style, which he was almost the first to introduce, and which he carried to the utmost pitch of classical refinement, reminds one exactly of Collins's description of wit as opposed to humour,

"Whose jewels in his crisped hair  
Are placed each other's light to share."

Sheridan will not bear a comparison with him in the regular antithetical construction of his sentences, and

in the mechanical artifices of his style, though so much later, and though style in general has been so much studied, and in the mechanical part so much improved since then. It bears every mark of being what he himself in the dedication of one of his plays tells us that it was, a spirited copy taken off and carefully revised from the most select society of his time, exhibiting all the sprightliness, ease, and animation of familiar conversation, with the correctness and delicacy of the most finished composition. His works are a singular treat to those who have cultivated a taste for the niceties of English style: there is a peculiar flavour in the very words, which is to be found in hardly any other writer. To the mere reader his writings would be an irreparable loss: to the stage they are already become a dead letter, with the exception of one of them, "*Love for Love.*" This play is as full of character, incident, and stage-effect, as almost any of those of his contemporaries, and fuller of wit than any of his own, except perhaps the "*Way of the World.*" It still acts, and is still acted well. The effect of it is prodigious on the well-informed spectator. In particular, Munden's *Foresight*, if it is not just the thing, is a wonderfully rich and powerful piece of comic acting. His look is planet-struck; his dress and appearance like one of the signs of the Zodiac taken down. Nothing can be more bewildered; and it only wants a little more helplessness, a little more of the doating, querulous garrulity of age, to be all that one conceives of the superannuated, star-gazing original. The gay, unconcerned opening of this play, and the romantic generosity of the conclusion, where Valentine, when about to resign his mistress, declares—"I never valued fortune, but as it was subservient to my pleasure; and my only pleasure was to please this lady,"—are alike admirable. The peremptory bluntness and exaggerated descriptions of Sir Sampson Legend are in a vein truly oriental, with a Shakespearean cast of language, and form a striking contrast to the quaint credulity and senseless superstitions of *Foresight*. The remonstrance

of his son to him, "to divest him, along with his inheritance, of his reason, thoughts, passions, inclinations, affections, appetites, senses, and the huge train of attendants which he brought into the world with him," with his valet's accompanying comments, is one of the most eloquent and spirited specimens of wit, pathos, and morality, that is to be found. The short scene with Trapland, the money-broker, is of the first water. What a picture is here drawn of Tattle! "More misfortunes, Sir!" says Jeremy. *Valentine*. "What, another dun?" *Jeremy*. "No, Sir, but Mr. Tattle is come to wait upon you." What an introduction to give of an honest gentleman in the shape of a misfortune! The scenes between him, Miss Prue, and Ben, are of a highly coloured description. Mrs. Frail and Mrs. Foresight are "sisters every way"; and the bodkin which Mrs. Foresight brings as a proof of her sister's levity of conduct, and which is so convincingly turned against her as a demonstration of her own—"Nay, if you come to that, where did you find that bodkin?"—is one of the trophies of the moral justice of the comic drama. The "Old Bachelor" and "Double Dealer" are inferior to "Love for Love," but one is never tired of reading them. The fault of the last is, that Lady Touchwood approaches, in the turbulent impetuosity of her character, and measured tone of her declamation, too near to the tragedy-queen; and that Maskwell's plots puzzle the brain by their intricacy, as they stagger our belief by their gratuitous villainy. Sir Paul and Lady Pliant, and my Lord and Lady Froth, are also scarcely credible in the extravagant insipidity and romantic vein of their follies, in which they are notably seconded by the lively Mr. Brisk and "dying Ned Careless."

The "Way of the World" was the author's last and most carefully finished performance. It is an essence almost too fine; and the sense of pleasure evaporates in an aspiration after something that seems too exquisite ever to have been realized. After inhaling the spirit of Congreve's wit, and tasting "love's thrice

reputed nectar" in his works, the head grows giddy in turning from the highest point of rapture to the ordinary business of life; and we can with difficulty recall the truant Fancy to those objects which we are fain to take up with here, *for better, for worse*. What can be more enchanting than Millamant and her morning thoughts, her *doux sommeils*? What more provoking than her reproach to her lover, who proposes to rise early, "Ah! idle creature!" The meeting of these two lovers, after the abrupt dismissal of Sir Wilful, is the height of careless and voluptuous elegance, as if they moved in air, and drank a finer spirit of humanity.

"*Millamant*. Like Phœbus sung the no less amorous boy.  
*Mirabell*. Like Daphne she, as lovely and as coy."

Millamant is the perfect model of the accomplished fine lady :

"Come, then, the colours and the ground prepare,  
Dip in the rainbow, trick her off in air;  
Choose a firm cloud, before it falls, and in it  
Catch ere she change, the Cynthia of a minute."

She is the ideal heroine of the comedy of high life, who arrives at the height of indifference to everything from the height of satisfaction ; to whom pleasure is as familiar as the air she draws ; elegance worn as a part of her dress ; wit the habitual language which she hears and speaks ; love, a matter of course ; and who has nothing to hope or to fear, her own caprice being the only law to herself, and rule to those about her. Her words seem composed of amorous sighs—her looks are glanced at prostrate admirers or envious rivals.

"If there's delight in love, 'tis when I see  
That heart that others bleed for, bleed for me."

She refines on her pleasures to satiety ; and is almost stifled in the incense that is offered to her person, her wit, her beauty, and her fortune. Secure of triumph,

her slaves tremble at her frown : her charms are so irresistible, that her conquests give her neither surprise nor concern. "Beauty the lover's gift?" she exclaims, in an answer to Mirabell—"Dear me, what is a lover that it can give? Why one makes lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases, and they die as soon as one pleases ; and then if one pleases, one makes more." We are not sorry to see her tamed down at last, from her pride of love and beauty, into a wife. She is good-natured and generous, with all her temptations to the contrary ; and her behaviour to Mirabell reconciles us to her treatment of Witwoud and Petulant, and of her country admirer, Sir Wilful.

Congreve has described all this in his character of Millamant, but he has done no more ; and if he had, he would have done wrong. He has given us the finest idea of an artificial character of this kind ; but it is still the reflection of an artificial character. The springs of nature, passion, or imagination are but feebly touched. The impressions appealed to, and with masterly address, are habitual, external, and conventional advantages ; the ideas of birth, of fortune, of connexions, of dress, accomplishment, fashion, the opinion of the world, of crowds of admirers, continually come into play, flatter our vanity, bribe our interest, soothe our indolence, fall in with our prejudices ;—it is these that support the goddess of our idolatry, with which she is everything, and without which she would be nothing. The mere fine lady of comedy, compared with the heroine of romance or poetry, when stripped of her adventitious ornaments and advantages, is too much like the doll stripped of its finery. In thinking of Millamant, we think almost as much of her dress as of her person : it is not so with respect to Rosalind or Perdita. The poet has painted them differently ; in colours which "nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on," with health, with innocence, with gaiety, "wild wit, ihvention ever new" ; with pure red and white, like the wild-

ing's blossoms ; with warbled wood-notes, like the feathered choir's ; with thoughts fluttering on the wings of imagination, and hearts panting and breathless with eager delight. The interest we feel is in themselves ; the admiration they excite is for themselves. They do not depend upon the drapery of circumstances. It is Nature that "blazons herself" in them. Imogen is the same in a lonely cave as in a court ; nay more, for she there seems something heavenly—a spirit or a vision ; and, as it were, shames her destiny, brighter for the foil of circumstances. Millamant is nothing but a fine lady ; and all her airs and affectation would be blown away with the first breath of misfortune. Envious in drawing-rooms, adorable at her toilette, fashion, like a witch, has thrown its spell around her ; but if that spell were broken, her power of fascination would be gone. For that reason I think the character better adapted for the stage : it is more artificial, more theatrical, more meretricious. I would rather have seen Mrs. Abington's Millamant than any Rosalind that ever appeared on the stage. Somehow, this sort of acquired elegance is more a thing of costume, of air and manner ; and in comedy, or on the comic stage, the light and familiar, the trifling, superficial, and agreeable, bears, perhaps, rightful sway over that which touches the affections, or exhausts the fancy.—There is a callousness in the worst characters in the "*Way of the World*," in Fainall, and his wife, and Mrs. Marwood, not very pleasant ; and a grossness in the absurd ones, such as Lady Wishfort and Sir Wilful, which is not a little amusing. Witwoud wishes to disclaim, as far as he can, his relationship to this last character, and says, "he's but his half brother" ; to which Mirabell makes answer—"Then, perhaps, he's but half a fool." Peg is an admirable caricature of rustic awkwardness and simplicity, which is carried to excess without any offence, from a sense of contrast to the refinement of the chief characters in the play. The description of Lady Wishfort's face is a perfect piece of painting.

The force of style in this author at times amounts to poetry. Waitwell, who personates Sir Rowland, and Foible, his accomplice in the matrimonial scheme upon her mistress, hang as a dead weight upon the plot. They are mere tools in the hands of Mirabell, and want life and interest. Congreve's characters can all of them speak well, they are mere machines when they come to act. Our author's superiority deserted him almost entirely with his wit. His serious and tragic poetry is frigid and jejune to an unaccountable degree. His *forte* was the description of actual manners, whether elegant or absurd; and when he could not deride the one or embellish the other, his attempts at romantic passion or imaginary enthusiasm are forced, abortive, and ridiculous, or commonplace. The description of the ruins of a temple in the beginning of the "Mourning Bride," was a great stretch of his poetic genius. It has, however, been overrated, particularly by Dr. Johnson, who could have done nearly as well himself for a single passage, in the same style of moralizing and sentimental description. To justify this general censure, and to show how the lightest and most graceful wit degenerates into the heaviest and most bombastic poetry, I will give one description out of his tragedy which will be enough. It is the speech which Gonsalez addresses to Almeria:

" Be every day of your long life like this.  
 The sun, bright conquest, and your brighter eyes  
 Have all conspired to blaze promiscuous light,  
 And bless this day with most unequal lustre.  
 Your royal father, my victorious lord,  
 Loaden with spoils and ever-living laurel,  
 Is entering now, in martial pomp, the palace.  
 Five hundred mules precede his solemn march,  
 Which groan beneath the weight of Moorish wealth.  
 Chariots of war, adorned with glittering gems,  
 Succeed ; and next, a hundred neighing steeds,  
 White as the fleasy rain on Alpine hills ;  
 That bound, and foam, and champ the golden bit,  
 As they disdain'd the victory they grace.

Prisoners of war in shining fetters follow :  
 And captains of the noblest blood of Afric  
 Sweat by his chariot-wheels, and lick and grind,  
 With gnashing teeth, the dust his triumphs raise.  
 The swarming populace spread every wall,  
 And cling, as if with claws they did enforce  
 Their hold, through clifted stones stretching and staring  
 As if they were all eyes, and every limb  
 Would feed its faculty of admiration,  
 While you alone retire, and shun this sight ;  
 This sight, which is indeed not seen (though twice  
 The multitude should gaze) in absence of your eyes."

This passage seems, in part, an imitation of Bolingbroke's "Entry into London." The style is as different from Shakespeare as it is from that of Witwoud and Petulant. It is plain that the imagination of the author could not raise itself above the burlesque. His "Mask of Semele," "Judgment of Paris," and other occasional poems, are even worse. I would not advise any one to read them, or if I did, they would not.

Wycherley was before Congreve; and his "Country Wife" will last longer than anything of Congreve's as a popular acting play. It is only a pity that it is not entirely his own; but it is enough so to do him never-ceasing honour, for the best things are his own. His humour is, in general, broader, his characters more natural, and his incidents more striking than Congreve's. It may be said of Congreve, that the workmanship overlays the materials: in Wycherley, the casting of the parts and the fable are alone sufficient to ensure success. We forget Congreve's characters, and only remember what they say: we remember Wycherley's characters, and the incidents they meet with, just as if they were real, and forget what they say, comparatively speaking. Miss Peggy (or Mrs. Margery Pinchwife) is a character that will last for ever, I should hope; and even when the original is no more, if that should ever be, while self-will, curiosity, art, and ignorance are to be found in the same person, it will be just as good and as intelligible as

ever in the description, because it is built on first principles, and brought out in the fullest and broadest manner. Agnes, in Molière's play, has a great deal of the same unconscious impulse and heedless *naïveté*, but hers is sentimentalized and varnished over (in the French fashion) with long-winded apologies and analytical distinctions. It wants the same simple force and home truth. It is not so direct and downright. Miss Peggy is not even a novice in casuistry : she blurts out her meaning before she knows what she is saying, and she speaks her mind by her actions oftener than by her words. The outline of the plot is the same ; but the point-blank hits and master-strokes, the sudden thoughts and delightful expedients, such as her changing the letters, the meeting her husband plump in the park, as she is running away from him as fast as her heels can carry her, her being turned out of doors by her jealous booby of a husband, and sent by him to her lover disguised as Alicia, her sister-in-law—occur first in the modern play. There are scarcely any incidents or situations on the stage, which tell like these for pantomimic effect, which give such a tingling to the blood, or so completely take away the breath with expectation and surprise. Miss Prue, in "Love for Love," is a lively reflection of Miss Peggy, but without the bottom and weight of metal. Hoyden is a match for her in constitution and complete effect, as Corinna, in "The Confederacy," is in mischief, but without the wit. Mrs. Jordan used to play all these characters ; and as she played them, it was hard to know which was best. Pinchwife, or Moody (as he is at present called), is, like others of Wycherley's moral characters, too rustic, abrupt, and cynical. He is a more disagreeable, but less tedious character than the husband of Agnes, and both seem, by all accounts, to have been rightly served. The character of Sparkish is quite new, and admirably hit off. He is an exquisite and suffocating coxcomb ; a pretender to wit and letters, without common understanding, or the use of his senses. The class of character is thoroughly exposed

and understood ; but he persists in his absurd conduct so far, that it becomes extravagant and disgusting, if not incredible, from mere weakness and foppery. Yet there is something in him that we are inclined to tolerate at first, as his professing that "with him a wit is the first title to respect"; and we regard his unwillingness to be pushed out of the room, and coming back in spite of their teeth, to keep the company of wits and railers, as a favourable omen. But he utterly disgraces his pretensions before he has done. With all his faults and absurdities, he is, however, a much less offensive character than Tattle. Horner is a stretch of probability in the first concoction of that ambiguous character (for he does not appear at present on the stage as Wycherley made him); but notwithstanding the indecency and indirectness of the means he employs to carry his plans into effect, he deserves every sort of consideration and forgiveness both for the display of his own ingenuity, and the deep insight he discovers into human nature—such as it was in the time of Wycherley. The author has commented on this character, and the double meaning of the name in his "Plain Dealer," borrowing the remarks, and almost the very words of Molière, who has brought forward and defended his own work against the objections of the precise part of his audience, in his *Critique de l'École des Femmes*. There is no great harm in these occasional plagiarisms, except that they make one uncomfortable at other times, and distrustful of the originality of the whole. The "Plain Dealer" is Wycherley's next best work, and is a most severe and poignant moral satire. There is a heaviness about it, indeed, an extravagance, an overdoing both in the style, the plot, and characters, but the truth of feeling and the force of interest prevail over every objection. The character of Manly, the Plain Dealer, is violent, repulsive, and uncouth, which is a fault, though one that seems to have been intended for the sake of contrast ; for the portrait of consummate, artful hypocrisy in Olivia, is, perhaps, rendered

more striking by it. The indignation excited against this odious and pernicious quality by the masterly exposure to which it is here subjected, is "a discipline of humanity." No one can read this play attentively without being the better for it as long as he lives. It penetrates to the core; it shows the immorality and hateful effects of duplicity, by showing it fixing its harpy fangs in the heart of an honest and worthy man. It is worth ten volumes of sermons. The scenes between Manly after his return, Olivia, Plausible, and Novel, are instructive examples of unblushing impudence, of shallow pretensions to principle, and of the most mortifying reflections on his own situation, and bitter sense of female injustice and ingratitude, on the part of Manly. The devil of hypocrisy and hardened assurance seems worked up to the highest pitch of conceivable effrontery in Olivia, when, after confiding to her cousin the story of her infamy, she, in a moment, turns round upon her for some sudden purpose, and affecting not to know the meaning of the other's allusions to what she has just told her, reproaches her with forging insinuations to the prejudice of her character, and in violation of their friendship. "Go! you're a censorious ill woman." This is more trying to the patience than anything in the "*Tartuffe*." The name of this heroine, and her overtures to Fidelia as the page, seem to have been suggested by "*Twelfth Night*." It is curious to see how the same subject is treated by two such different authors as Shakespeare and Wycherley. The widow Blackacre and her son are, like her lawsuit—everlasting. A more lively, palpable, bustling, ridiculous picture cannot be drawn. Jerry is a hopeful lad, though undutiful, and gets out of bad hands into worse. Goldsmith evidently had an eye to these two precious characters in "*She Stoops to Conquer*." Tony Lumpkin and his mother are of the same family, and the incident of the theft of the casket of jewels, and the bag of parchments, is nearly the same in both authors. Wycherley's other plays are not so good. The "*Gentleman Dancing Master*"

is a long, foolish farce, in the exaggerated manner of Molière, but without his spirit or whimsical invention. "Love in a Wood," though not what one would wish it to be for the author's sake or our own, is much better, and abounds in several rich and highly-coloured scenes, particularly those in which Miss Lucy, her mother Crossbite, Dapperwit, and Alderman Gripe are concerned. Some of the subordinate characters and intrigues in this comedy are grievously spun out. Wycherley, when he got hold of a good thing, or sometimes even of a bad one, was determined to make the most of it ; and might have said with Dogberry, truly enough, "Had I the tediousness of a king, I could find in my heart to bestow it all upon your worships." In reading this author's best works, those which one reads most frequently over, and knows almost by heart, one cannot help thinking of the treatment he received from Pope about his verses. It was hardly excusable in a boy of sixteen to an old man of seventy.

Vanbrugh comes next, and holds his own fully with the best. He is no writer at all, as to mere authorship ; but he makes up for it by a prodigious fund of comic invention and ludicrous description, bordering somewhat on caricature. Though he did not borrow from him, he was much more like Molière in genius than Wycherley was, who professedly imitated him. He has none of Congreve's graceful refinement, and as little of Wycherley's serious manner and studied insight into the springs of character ; but his exhibition of it in dramatic contrast and unlooked-for situations, where the different parties play upon one another's failings, and into one another's hands, keeping up the jest like a game at battledore and shuttlecock, and urging it to the utmost verge of breathless extravagance, in the mere eagerness of the fray, is beyond that of any other of our writers. His fable is not so profoundly laid, nor his characters so well digested, as Wycherley's (who, in these respects, bore some resemblance to Fielding). Vanbrugh does not

lay the same deliberate train from the outset to the conclusion, so that the whole may hang together, and tend inevitably from the combination of different agents and circumstances to the same decisive point; but he works out scene after scene on the spur of the occasion, and from the immediate hold they take of his imagination at the moment, without any previous bias or ultimate purpose, much more powerfully, with more *verve*, and in a richer vein of original invention. His fancy warms and burnishes out as if he were engaged in the real scene of action, and felt all his faculties suddenly called forth to meet the emergency. He has more nature than art; what he does best, he does because he cannot help it. He has a masterly eye to the advantages which certain accidental situations of character present to him on the spot, and executes the most difficult and rapid theatrical movements at a moment's warning. Of this kind are the inimitable scenes in the "Provoked Wife," between Razor and Mademoiselle, where they repeat and act over again the rencontre in the Mulberry walk between Constant and his mistress, than which nothing was ever more happily conceived, or done to more absolute perfection; that again in the "Relapse," where Loveless pushes Berinthia into the closet; the sudden meeting, in the "Confederacy," between Dick and Mrs. Amlet; the altercation about the letter between Flippanta and Corinna, in the same play, and that again where Brass, at the house of Gripe the money-scrivener, threatens to discover his friend and accomplice, and by talking louder and louder to him, as he tries to evade his demands, extorts a grudging submission from him. This last scene is as follows:—

"*Dick.* I wish my old hobbling mother ha'n't been blabbing something here she should not do."

*Brass.* Fear nothing, all's safe on that side yet. But how speaks young mistress's epistle? soft and tender!"

*Dick.* As pen can write.

*Brass.* So you think all goes well there!

*Dick.* As my heart can wish.

*Brass.* You are sure on't!

*Dick.* Sure on't.

*Brass.* Why then, ceremony aside [*putting on his hat*], you and I must have a little talk, Mr. Amlet.

*Dick.* Ah, Brass, what art thou going to do? wo't ruin me?

*Brass.* Look you, Dick, few words; you are in a smooth way of making your fortune; I hope all will roll on. But how do you intend matters shall pass 'twixt you and me in this business?

*Dick.* Death and furies! What a time dost take to talk on't?

*Brass.* Good words, or I betray you; they have already heard of one Mr. Amlet in the house.

*Dick.* Here's a son of a whore.

[*Aside.*]

*Brass.* In short, look smooth, and be a good prince. I am your valet, 'tis true: your footman sometimes, which I'm enraged at; but you have always had the ascendant, I confess: when we were schoolfellows, you made me carry your books, make your exercise, own your rogueries, and sometimes take a whipping for you. When we were fellow-prentices, though I was your senior, you made me open the shop, clean my master's shoes, cut last at dinner, and eat all the crust. In our sins, too, I must own you still kept me under; you scold'd up to adultery with the mistress, while I was at humble fornication with the maid. Nay, in our punishments you still made good your post; for when once upon a time I was sentenced but to be whipp'd, I cannot deny but you were condemned to be hang'd. So that in all times, I must confess, your inclinations have been greater and nobler than mine; however, I cannot consent that you should at once fix fortune for life, and I dwell in my humilities for the rest of my days.

*Dick.* Hark thee, Brass, if I do not most nobly by thee, I'm a dog.

*Brass.* And when?

*Dick.* As soon as ever I am married.

*Brass.* Ay, the plague take thee.

*Dick.* Then you mistrust me?

*Brass.* I do, by my faith. Look you, Sir, some folks we mistrust, because we don't know them: others we mistrust, because we do know them: and for one of these reasons I desire there may be a bargain beforehand: if not [*raising his voice*], look ye, Dick Amlet——

*Dick.* Soft, my dear friend and companion. The dog will ruin me [*aside*]. Say, what is't will content thee?

*Brass.* O ho!

*Dick.* But how canst thou be such a barbarian!

*Brass.* I learnt it at Algiers.

*Dick.* Come, make thy Turkish demand then.

*Brass.* You know you gave me a bank-bill this morning to receive for you.

*Dick.* I did so, of fifty pounds; 'tis thine. So now thou art satisfied; all is fixed.

*Brass.* It is not, indeed. There's a diamond necklace you robb'd your mother of e'en now.

*Dick.* Ah, you Jew!

*Brass.* No words.

*Dick.* My dear Brass.

*Brass.* I insist.

*Dick.* My old friend!

*Brass.* Dick Amlet [*raising his voice*], I insist.

*Dick.* Ah, the cormorant [*aside*]. Well, 'tis thine; thou'll never thrive with it.

*Brass.* When I find it begins to do me mischief, I'll give it you back again. But I must have a wedding suit.

*Dick.* Well.

*Brass.* A stock of linen.

*Dick.* Enough.

*Brass.* Not yet—a silver-hilted sword.

*Dick.* Well, thou shalt have that too. Now thou hast everything.

*Brass.* Heav'n forgive me, I forgot a ring of remembrance. I would not forget all these favours for the world; a sparkling diamond will be always playing in my eye, and put me in mind of them.

*Dick.* This unconscionable rogue [*aside*]. Well, I'll bespeak one for thee.

*Brass.* Brilliant.

*Dick.* It shall. But if the thing don't succeed after all—

*Brass.* I am a man of honour and restore: and so, the treaty being finished, I strike my flag of defiance, and fall into my respects again." [*Takes off his hat*.]

The "Confederacy" is a comedy of infinite contrivance and intrigue, with a matchless spirit of impudence. It is a fine careless *exposé* of heartless want of principle; for there is no anger or severity against vice expressed in it, as in Wycherley. The author's morality in all cases except his "Provoked Wife" (which was undertaken as a penance for past peccadilloes), sits very loose upon him. It is a little upon the turn; "it does somewhat smack," Old Palmer, as Dick Amlet, asking his mother's blessing

on his knee, was the very idea of a graceless son. His sweetheart Corinna is a Miss Prue, but nature works in her more powerfully. Lord Foppington, in "The Relapse," is a most splendid caricature: he is a personification of the foppery and folly of dress and external appearance in full feather. He blazes out and dazzles sober reason with ridiculous ostentation. Still, I think this character is a copy from Etherege's Sir Fopling Flutter, and upon the whole, perhaps, Sir Fopling is the more natural grotesque of the two. His soul is more in his dress; he is a more disinterested coxcomb. The Lord is an ostentatious, strutting, vainglorious blockhead; the knight is an unaffected, self-complacent, serious admirer of his equipage and person. For instance, what they severally say on the subject of contemplating themselves in the glass is a proof of this. Sir Fopling thinks a looking-glass in the room "the best company in the world"; it is another self to him: Lord Foppington merely considers it as necessary to adjust his appearance, that he may make a figure in company. The finery of the one has an imposing air of grandeur about it, and is studied for effect: the other is really in love with a laced suit, and is hand and glove with the newest-cut fashion. He really thinks his tailor or peruke-maker the greatest man in the world, while his Lordship treats them familiarly, as necessary appendages of his person. Still this coxcomb-nobleman's effeminacy and mock-heroic vanity are admirably depicted, and held up to unrivalled ridicule; and his courtship of Miss Hoyden is excellent in all its stages, and ends oracularly:—

"*Lord Foppington.* Now, for my part, I think the wisest thing a man can do with an aching heart, is to put on a serene countenance; for a philosophical air is the most becoming thing in the world to the face of a person of quality: I will therefore bear my disgrace like a great man, and let the people see I am above an affront. [Then turning to his brother.] Dear Tam, since things are thus fallen out, pr'ythee give me leave to wish thee joy; I do it *de bon cœur*, strike me

dumb: you have married a woman beautiful in her person, charming in her airs, prudent in her conduct, constant in her inclinations, and of a nice morality—stap my vitals!"

Poor Hoyden fares ill in his Lordship's description of her, though she could expect no better at his hands for her desertion of him. She wants sentiment, to be sure, but she has other qualifications—she is a fine bouncing piece of flesh and blood. Her first announcement is decisive—"Let loose the greyhound, and lock up Hoyden." Her declaration, "It's well they've got me a husband, or, ecod, I'd marry the baker," comes from her mouth like a shot from a culverin, and leaves no doubt, by its effect upon the ear, that she would have made it good in the sequel, if she had not been provided for. Her indifference to the man she is to marry, and her attachment to the finery and the title, are justified by an attentive observation of nature in its simplest guise. There is, however, no harm in Hoyden; she merely wishes to consult her own inclination: she is by no means like Corinna in "The Confederacy," "a devilish girl at the bottom," nor is it her great delight to plague other people.—Sir Tunbally Clumsy is the right worshipful and worthy father of so delicate an offspring. He is a coarse, substantial contrast to the flippant and flimsy Lord Foppington. If the one is not without reason "proud to be at the head of so prevailing a party" as that of coxcombs, the other may look big and console himself (under some affronts) with being a very competent representative of the once formidable, though now obsolete class of country squires, who had no idea beyond the boundaries of their own estates, or the circumference of their own persons. His unwieldy dullness gives, by the rule of contraries, a lively sense of lightness and grace: his stupidity answers all the purposes of wit. His portly paunch repels a jest like a woolsack: a sarcasm rebounds from him like a ball. His presence is a cure for gravity; and he is a standing satire upon himself and the class in natural history.

to which he belonged.—Sir John Brute, in “The Provoked Wife,” is an animal of the same English growth, but of a cross-grained breed. He has a spice of the demon mixed up with the brute ; is mischievous as well as stupid ; has improved his natural parts by a town education and example ; opposes the fine-lady airs and graces of his wife by brawling oaths, impenetrable surliness, and pot-house valour ; overpowers any tendency she might have to vapours or hysterics by the fumes of tobacco and strong beer ; and thinks to be master in his own house by roaring in taverns, reeling home drunk every night, breaking lamps, and beating the watch. He does not, however, find this lordly method answer. He turns out to be a coward as well as a bully, and dares not resent the injuries he has provoked by his unmanly behaviour. This was Garrick’s favourite part ; and I have heard that his acting in the drunken scene, in which he was disguised not as a clergyman, but as a woman of the town, which was an alteration of his own to suit the delicacy of the times, was irresistible. The ironical conversations in this play between Belinda and Lady Brute, as well as those in “The Relapse” between Amanda and her cousin Berinthia, will do to compare with Congreve in the way of wit and studied raillery, but they will not stand the comparison. Araminta and Clarissa keep up the ball between them with more spirit, for their conversation is very like that of kept-mistresses ; and the mixture of fashionable *slang* and professed want of principle gives a sort of zest and high seasoning to their confidential communications, which Vanbrugh could supply as well as anybody. But he could not do without the taint of grossness and licentiousness. Lady Townly is not really the vicious character, nor quite the fine lady, which the author would have her to be. Lady Grace is so far better ; she is what she pretends to be, merely *sober* and insipid.—Vanbrugh’s *forte* was not the sentimental or didactic ; his genius flags and grows dull when it is not put into action, and wants the stimulus of sudden emergency,

or the fortuitous collision of different motives, to call out all his force and vivacity. His antitheses are happy and brilliant contrasts of character ; his *double entendres* equivocal situations ; his best jokes are practical devices, not epigrammatic conceits. His wit is that which is emphatically called *mother-wit*. It brings those who possess it, or to whom he lends it, into scrapes by its restlessness, and brings them out of them by its alacrity. Several of his favourite characters are knavish, adroit adventurers, who have all the gipsy jargon, the cunning impudence, cool presence of mind, selfishness, and indefatigable industry ; all the excuses, lying, dexterity, the intellectual juggling and legerdemain tricks, necessary to fit them for this sort of predatory warfare on the simplicity, follies, or vices of mankind. He discovers the utmost dramatic generalship in bringing off his characters at a pinch, and by an instantaneous *ruse de guerre*, when the case seems hopeless in any other hands. The train of his associations, to express the same thing in metaphysical language, lies in following the suggestions of his fancy into every possible connexion of cause and effect, rather than into every possible combination of likeness or difference. His ablest characters show that they are so by displaying their ingenuity, address, and presence of mind in critical junctures, and in their own affairs, rather than their wisdom or their wit "in intellectual gladiatorialship," or in speculating on the affairs and characters of other people.

Farquhar's chief characters are also adventurers ; but they are adventurers of a romantic, not a knavish stamp, and succeed no less by their honesty than their boldness. They conquer their difficulties, and effect their "hair-breadth 'scapes" by the impulse of natural enthusiasm and the confidence of high principles of gallantry and honour, as much as by their dexterity and readiness at expedients. They are real gentlemen, and only pretended impostors. Vanbrugh's upstart heroes are without "any relish of salvation," without generosity, virtue, or any pretensions to it.

We have little sympathy for them, and no respect at all. But we have every sort of goodwill towards Farquhar's heroes, who have as many peccadilloes to answer for, and play as many rogue's tricks, but are honest fellows at bottom. I know little other difference between these two capital writers and copyists of nature, than that Farquhar's nature is the better nature of the two. We seem to like both the author and his favourites. He has humour, character, and invention, in common with the other, with a more unaffected gaiety and spirit of enjoyment, which overflows and sparkles in all he does. He makes us laugh from pleasure oftener than from malice. He somewhere prides himself in having introduced on the stage the class of comic heroes here spoken of, which has since become a standard character, and which represents the warm-hearted, rattle-brained, thoughtless, high-spirited young fellow, who floats on the back of his misfortunes without repining, who forfeits appearances, but saves his honour—and he gives us to understand that it was his own. He did not need to be ashamed of it. Indeed there is internal evidence that this sort of character is his own, for it pervades his works generally, and is the moving spirit that informs them. His comedies have on this account probably a greater appearance of truth and nature than almost any others. His incidents succeed one another with rapidity, but without premeditation; his wit is easy and spontaneous; his style animated, unembarrassed, and flowing; his characters full of life and spirit, and never overstrained so as to "o'erstep the modesty of nature," though they sometimes, from haste and carelessness, seem left in a crude, unfinished state. There is a constant ebullition of gay, laughing invention, cordial good humour, and fine animal spirits, in his writings.

Of the four writers here classed together, we should perhaps have courted Congreve's acquaintance most, for his wit and the elegance of his manners; Wycherley's, for his sense and observation on human nature;

Vanbrugh's, for his power of farcical description and telling a story ; Farquhar's, for the pleasure of his society, and the love of good fellowship. His fine gentlemen are not gentlemen of fortune and fashion, like those in Congreve, but are rather "God Almighty's gentlemen." His valets are good fellows : even his chambermaids are, some of them, disinterested and sincere. But his fine ladies, it must be allowed, are not so amiable, so witty, or accomplished, as those in Congreve. Perhaps they both described women in high-life as they found them : Congreve took their conversation, Farquhar their conduct. In the way of fashionable vice and petrifying affectation, there is nothing to come up to his Lady Lurewell, in "The Trip to the Jubilee." She by no means makes good Mr. Burke's courtly and chivalrous observation, that the evil of vice consists principally in its want of refinement ; and one benefit of the dramatic exhibition of such characters is, that they overturn false maxims of morality, and settle accounts fairly and satisfactorily between theory and practice. Her lover, Colonel Standard, is indeed an awkward incumbrance upon so fine a lady ; it was a character that the poet did not like ; and he has merely sketched him in, leaving him to answer for himself as well as he could, which is but badly. We have no suspicion, either from his conduct, or from any hint dropped by accident, that he is the first seducer and the possessor of the virgin affections of Lady Lurewell. The double transformation of this virago from vice to virtue, and from virtue to vice again, her plausible pretensions and artful wiles, her violent temper and dissolute passions, show a thorough knowledge of the effects both of nature and habit in making up human character. Farquhar's own heedless turn for gallantry would be likely to throw him upon such a character ; and his goodness of heart and sincerity of disposition would teach him to expose its wanton duplicity and gilded rottenness. Lurewell is almost as abandoned a character as Olivia, in "The Plain Dealer" ; but the indignation excited

against her is of a less serious and tragic cast. Her peevish disgust and affected horror at everything that comes near her, form a very edifying picture. Her dissatisfaction and *ennui* are not mere airs and graces worn for fashion's sake, but are real and tormenting inmates of her breast, arising from a surfeit of pleasure and the consciousness of guilt. All that is hateful in the caprice, ill humour, spite, *hauteur*, folly, impudence, and affectation of the complete woman of quality, is contained in the scene between her and her servants in the first act. The depravity would be intolerable, even in imagination, if the weakness were not ludicrous in the extreme. It shows, in the highest degree, the power of circumstances and example to pervert the understanding, the imagination, and even the senses. The manner in which the character of the gay, wild, free-hearted, but not altogether profligate or unfeeling Sir Harry Wildair, is played off against the designing, vindictive, imperious, uncontrollable, and unreasonable humours of Lurewell, in the scene where she tries to convince him of his wife's infidelity, while he stops his ears to her pretended proofs, is not surpassed in modern comedy. I shall give it here :—

" *Wildair.* Now, dear Madam, I have secured my brother, you have disposed of the Colonel, and we'll rail at love till we ha'n't a word more to say.

*Lurewell.* Ay, Sir Harry. Please to sit a little, Sir. You must know I'm in a strange humour of asking you some questions. How did you like your Lady, pray, Sir?

*Wild.* Like her! Ha, ha, ha! So very well, faith, that for her very sake I'm in love with every woman I meet.

*Lure.* And did matrimony please you extremely?

*Wild.* So very much, that if polygamy were allowed I would have a new wife every day.

*Lure.* Oh, Sir Harry! this is raillery. But your serious thoughts upon the matter, pray.

*Wild.* Why then, Madam, to give you my true sentiments of wedlock: I had a lady that I married by chance—she was virtuous by chance—and I loved her by great chance. Nature gave her beauty, education an air; and fortune threw a young fellow, five-and-twenty, in her lap. I courted her all day, loved her all night; she was my mistress one day and my wife

another ; I found in one the variety of a thousand, and the very confinement of marriage gave me the pleasure of change.

*Lure.* And she was very virtuous.

*Wild.* Look ye, Madam, you know she was beautiful. She had good nature about her mouth, the smile of beauty in her cheeks, sparkling wit in her forehead, and sprightly love in her eyes.

*Lure.* Pshaw ! I knew her very well ; the woman was well enough. But you don't answer my question, Sir.

*Wild.* So, Madam, as I told you before, she was young and beautiful, I was rich and vigorous ; my estate gave a lustre to my love, and a swing to our enjoyment ; round, like the ring that made us one, our golden pleasures circled without end.

*Lure.* Golden pleasures ! Golden fiddlesticks ! What d'ye tell me of your canting stuff ? Was she virtuous, I say ?

*Wild.* Ready to burst with envy ; but I will torment thee a little [*aside*]. So, Madam, I powdered to please her, she dressed to engage me ; we toyed away the morning in amorous nonsense, lolled away the evening in the park or the play-house, and all the night—hem !

*Lure.* Look ye, Sir, answer my question, or I shall take it ill.

*Wild.* Then, Madam, there was never such a pattern of unity. Her wants were still prevented by my supplies ; my own heart whispered me her desires, 'cause she herself was there ; no contention ever rose, but the dear strife of who should most oblige ; no noise about authority ; for neither would stoop to command, 'cause both thought it glory to obey.

*Lure.* Stuff ! stuff ! stuff ! I won't believe a word on't.

*Wild.* Ha, ha, ha ! Then, Madam, we never felt the yoke of matrimony, because our inclinations made us one—a power superior to the forms of wedlock. The marriage torch had lost its weaker light in the bright flame of mutual love that joined our hearts before ; then—

*Lure.* Hold, hold, Sir ; I cannot bear it, Sir Harry, I'm affronted.

*Wild.* Ha, ha, ha ! Affronted !

*Lure.* Yes, Sir ; 'tis an affront to any woman to hear another commended, and I will resent it. In short, Sir Harry, your wife was a—

*Wild.* Buz, Madam—no detraction. I'll tell you what she was. So much an angel in her conduct, that though I saw another in her arms, I should have thought the devil had raised the phantom, and my more conscious reason had given my eyes the lie.

*Lure.* Very well ! then I a'n't to be believed, it seems. But, d'ye hear, Sir !

*Wild.* Nay, Madam, do you hear! I tell you 'tis not in the power of malice to cast a blot upon her fame; and though the vanity of our sex, and the envy of yours, conspired both against her honour, I would not hear a syllable. [Stopping his ears.]

*Lure.* Why then, as I hope to breathe, you shall hear it. The picture! the picture! the picture! [Bawling aloud.]

*Wild.* Ran, tan, tan. A pistol-bullet from ear to ear.

*Lure.* That picture which you had just now from the French Marquis for a thousand pounds; that very picture did your very virtuous wife send to the Marquis as a pledge of her very virtuous and dying affection. So that you are both robbed of your honour and cheated of your money. [Loud.]

*Wild.* Louder, louder, Madam.

*Lure.* I tell you, Sir, your wife was a jilt; I know it, I'll swear it. She virtuous! she was a devil!

*Wild.* [Sings] Tal, al, deral.

*Lure.* Was ever the like seen! He won't hear me. I burst with malice, and now he won't mind me! Won't you hear me yet?

*Wild.* No, no, Madam!

*Lure.* Nay, then I can't bear it. [Bursts out a' crying.] Sir, I must say that you're an unworthy person, to use a woman of quality at this rate, when she has her heart full of malice; I don't know but it may make me miscarry. Sir, I say again and again, that she was no better than one of us, and I know it; I have seen it with my eyes, so I have.

*Wild.* Good heav'ns deliver me, I beseech thee! How shall I 'scape?

*Lure.* Will you hear me yet? Dear Sir Harry, do but hear me; I'm longing to speak.

*Wild.* Oh! I have it.—Hush, hush, hush.

*Lure.* Eh! what's the matter?

*Wild.* A mouse! a mouse! a mouse!

*Lure.* Where? where? where?

*Wild.* Your petticoats, your petticoats, Madam. [Lurewell shrieks and runs.] O my head! I was never worsted by a woman before. But I have heard so much to know the Marquis to be a villain. [Knocking.] Nay, then, I must run for't. [Runs out and returns.] The entry is stopped by a chair coming in; and something there is in that chair that I will discover, if I can find a place to hide myself. [Goes to the closet door.] Fast! I have keys about me for most locks about St. James's. Let me see. [Tries one key.] No, no; this opens my Lady Planthorn's back-door. [Tries another.] Nor this; this is the key to my Lady Stakeall's garden. [Tries a third.] Ay, ay, this does it, faith. [Goes into the closet.]

The dialogue between Cherry and Archer, in "The Beaux' Stratagem," in which she repeats her well-conned love catechism, is as good as this, but not so fit to be repeated anywhere but on the stage. "The Beaux' Stratagem" is the best of his plays as a whole; infinitely lively, bustling, and full of point and interest.

The assumed disguise of the two principal characters, Archer and Aimwell, is a perpetual amusement to the mind. Scrub is an indispensable appendage to a country gentleman's kitchen, and an exquisite confidant for the secrets of young ladies. "The Recruiting Officer" is not one of Farquhar's best comedies, though it is light and entertaining. It contains chiefly sketches and hints of characters, and the conclusion of the plot is rather lame. He informs us, in the dedication to the published play, that it was founded on some local and personal circumstances that happened in Shropshire, where he was himself a recruiting officer; and it seems not unlikely that most of the scenes actually took place at the foot of the Wrekin. "The Inconstant" is much superior to it. The romantic interest and impressive catastrophe of this play, I thought, had been borrowed from the more poetical and tragedy-practised muse of Beaumont and Fletcher; but I find they are taken from an actual circumstance which took place in the author's knowledge, at Paris. His other pieces, "Love and a Bottle," and "The Twin Rivals," are not on a par with these, and no longer in possession of the stage. The public are, after all, not the worst judges. Farquhar's "Letters," pre-fixed to the collection of his plays, are lively, good-humoured, and sensible, and contain, among other things, an admirable exposition of the futility of the dramatic unities of time and place.

This criticism preceded Dennis's remarks on that subject, in his strictures on Mr. Addison's "Cato," and completely anticipates all that Dr. Johnson has urged so unanswerably on the subject in his preface to Shakespeare.

We may date the decline of English comedy from the time of Farquhar.

For this several causes might be assigned in the political and moral changes of the times ; but, among other minor ones, Jeremy Collier, in his "View of the English Stage," frightened the poets, and did all he could to spoil the stage by pretending to reform it ; that is, by making it an echo of the pulpit, instead of a reflection of the manners of the world. He complains bitterly of the profaneness of the stage ; and is for fining the actors for every oath they utter, to put an end to the practice ; as if common swearing had been an invention of the poets and stage-players. He cannot endure that the fine gentlemen drink, and the fine ladies intrigue, in the scenes of Congreve and Wycherley, when things so contrary to law and gospel happened nowhere else. He is vehement against duelling, as a barbarous custom, of which the example is suffered with impunity nowhere but on the stage. He is shocked at the number of fortunes that are irreparably ruined by the vice of gaming on the boards of the theatres. He seems to think that every breach of the ten commandments begins and ends there. He complains that the tame husbands of his time are laughed at on the stage, and that the successful gallants triumph, which was without precedent either in the city or the Court. He does not think it enough that the stage "shows vice its own image, scorn its own feature," unless they are damned at the same instant, and carried off (like Don Juan) by real devils to the infernal regions, before the faces of the spectators. It seems that the author would have been contented to be present at a comedy or a farce, like a Father Inquisitor, if there was to be an *auto da fé* at the end, to burn both the actors and the poet. This sour, nonjuring critic has a great horror and repugnance at poor human nature in nearly all its shapes, of the existence of which he appears only to be aware through the stage : and this he considers as the only exception to the practice of piety, and the performance of the whole duty of

man ; and seems fully convinced, that if this nuisance were abated, the whole world would be regulated according to the creed and the catechism.—This is a strange blindness and infatuation ! He forgets, in his overheated zeal, two things : First, that the stage must be copied from real life, that the manners represented there must exist elsewhere, and “denote a foregone conclusion,” to satisfy common sense.—Secondly, that the stage cannot shock common decency, according to the notions that prevail of it in any age or country, because the exhibition is public. If the pulpit, for instance, had banished all vice and imperfection from the world, as our critic would suppose, we should not have seen the offensive reflection of them on the stage, which he resents as an affront to the cloth, and an outrage on religion. On the contrary, with such a sweeping reformation as this theory implies, the office of the preacher, as well as of the player, would be gone ; and if the common peccadilloes of lying, swearing, intriguing, fighting, drinking, gaming, and other such obnoxious dramatic commonplaces, were once fairly got rid of in reality, neither the comic poet would be able to laugh at them on the stage, nor our good-natured author to consign them over to damnation elsewhere. The work is, however, written with ability, and did much mischief : it produced those *do-me-good*, lackadaisical, whining, make-believe comedies in the next age (such as Steele’s “Conscious Lovers,” and others), which are enough to set one to sleep, and where the author tries in vain to be merry and wise in the same breath ; in which the utmost stretch of licentiousness goes no farther than the gallant’s being suspected of keeping a mistress, and the highest proof of courage is given in his refusing to accept a challenge.

In looking into the old editions of the comedies of the last age, I find the names of the best actors of those times, of whom scarcely any record is left but in Colley Cibber’s Life, and the monument to Mrs. Oldfield in Westminster Abbey ; which Voltaire reckons

among the proofs of the liberality, wisdom, and politeness of the English nation :—

“ Let no rude hand deface it,  
And its forlorn *hic jacet.* ”

Authors after their deaths live in their works : players only in their epitaphs and the breath of common tradition. They “ die and leave the world no copy.” Their uncertain popularity is as short-lived as it is dazzling, and in a few years nothing is known of them but that *they were.*

## LECTURE V

## ON THE PERIODICAL ESSAYISTS

"The proper study of mankind is man."

I now come to speak of that sort of writing which has been so successfully cultivated in this country by our periodical Essayists, and which consists in applying the talents and resources of the mind to all that mixed mass of human affairs, which, though not included under the head of any regular art, science, or profession, falls under the cognizance of the writer, and "comes home to the business and bosoms of men." *Quicquid agunt homines nostri farrago libelli*, is the general motto of this department of literature. It does not treat of minerals or fossils, of the virtues of plants, or the influence of planets; it does not meddle with forms of belief, or systems of philosophy, nor launch into the world of spiritual existences; but it makes familiar with the world of men and women, records their actions, assigns their motives, exhibits their whims, characterizes their pursuits in all their singular and endless variety, ridicules their absurdities, exposes their inconsistencies, "holds the mirror up to nature, and shows the very age and body of the time, its form and pressure"; takes minutes of our dress, air, looks, words, thoughts, and actions; shows us what we are, and what we are not; plays the whole game of human life over before us, and by making us enlightened spectators of its many-coloured scenes, enables us (if possible) to become tolerably reasonable agents in the one in which we have to perform a part. "The act and practic part of life is thus made the mistress of our

theorique." It is the best and most natural course of study. It is in morals and manners what the experimental is in natural philosophy, as opposed to the dogmatical method. It does not deal in sweeping clauses of proscription and anathema, but in nice distinctions and liberal constructions. It makes up its general accounts from details, its few theories from many facts. It does not try to prove all black or all white as it wishes, but lays on the intermediate colours (and most of them not unpleasing ones), as it finds them blended with "the web of our life, which is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together." It inquires what human life is and has been, to show what it ought to be. It follows it into courts and camps, into town and country, into rustic sports or learned disputations, into the various shades of prejudice or ignorance, of refinement or barbarism, into its private haunts or public pageants, into its weaknesses and littlenesses, its professions and its practices—before it pretends to distinguish right from wrong, or one thing from another. How, indeed, should it do so otherwise?

"Quid sit pulchrum, quid turpe, quid utile, quid non,  
Plenus et melius Chrysippo et Crantore dicit."

The writers I speak of are, if not moral philosophers, moral historians, and that's better; or if they are both, they found the one character upon the other; their premises precede their conclusions; and we put faith in their testimony, for we know that it is true.

Montaigne was the first person who in his Essays led the way to this kind of writing among the moderns. The great merit of Montaigne then was, that he may be said to have been the first who had the courage to say as an author what he felt as a man. And as courage is generally the effect of conscious strength, he was probably led to do so by the richness, truth, and force of his own observations on books and men. He was, in the truest sense, a man of original mind,

that is, he had the power of looking at things for himself, or as they really were, instead of blindly trusting to, and fondly repeating what others told him that they were. He got rid of the go-cart of prejudice and affectation, with the learned lumber that follows at their heels, because he could do without them. In taking up his pen he did not set up for a philosopher, wit, orator, or moralist, but he became all these by merely daring to tell us whatever passed through his mind, in its naked simplicity and force, that he thought anyways worth communicating. He did not, in the abstract character of an author, undertake to say all that could be said upon a subject, but what in his capacity as an inquirer after truth he happened to know about it. He was neither a pedant nor a bigot. He neither supposed that he was bound to know all things, nor that all things were bound to conform to what he had fancied or would have them to be. In treating of men and manners, he spoke of them as he found them, not according to preconceived notions and abstract dogmas; and he began by teaching us what he himself was. In criticizing books he did not compare them with rules and systems, but told us what he saw to like or dislike in them. He did not take his standard of excellence "according to an exact scale" of Aristotle, or fall out with a work that was good for anything, because "not one of the angles at the four corners was a right one." He was, in a word, the first author who was not a book-maker, and who wrote, not to make converts of others to established creeds and prejudices, but to satisfy his own mind of the truth of things. In this respect we know not which to be most charmed with, the author or the man. There is an inexpressible frankness and sincerity, as well as power, in what he writes. There is no attempt at imposition or concealment, no juggling tricks or solemn mouthings, no laboured attempts at proving himself always in the right, and everybody else in the wrong; he says what is uppermost, lays open what floats at the top or the bottom of his mind,

and deserves Pope's character of him, where he professes to

"——— pour out all as plain  
As downright Shippen, or as old Montaigne."<sup>1</sup>

He does not converse with us like a pedagogue with his pupil, whom he wishes to make as great a block-head as himself, but like a philosopher and friend who has passed through life with thought and observation, and is willing to enable others to pass through it with pleasure and profit. A writer of this stamp, I confess, appears to me as much superior to a common book-worm as a library of real books is superior to a mere book-case, painted and lettered on the outside with the names of celebrated works. As he was the first to attempt this new way of writing, so the same strong natural impulse which prompted the undertaking, carried him to the end of his career. The same force and honesty of mind which urged him to throw off the shackles of custom and prejudice, would enable him to complete his triumph over them. He has left little for his successors to achieve in the way of just and original speculation on human life. Nearly all the thinking of the two last centuries of that kind which the French denominate *morale observatrice*, is to be found in Montaigne's Essays: there is a germ, at least, and generally much more. He sowed the seed and cleared away the rubbish, even where others have reaped the fruit, or cultivated and decorated the soil to a greater degree of nicety and perfection. There is no one to whom the old Latin adage is more applicable than to Montaigne, "*Pereant isti qui ante nos nostra dixerunt.*" There has been no new impulse given to thought since his time. Among the specimens of criticisms on authors which he has left us, are those on Virgil, Ovid, and Boccaccio, in the account of books which he thinks worth reading, or (which is the

<sup>1</sup> Why Pope should say in reference to him, "Or *more wise* Charron," is not easy to determine.

same thing) which he finds he can read in his old age, and which may be reckoned among the few criticisms which are worth reading at any age.<sup>1</sup>

Montaigne's Essays were translated into English by Charles Cotton, who was one of the wits and poets of the age of Charles II; and Lord Halifax, one of the noble critics of that day, declared it to be "the book in the world he was the best pleased with." This mode of familiar Essay writing, free from the trammels of the schools and the airs of professed authorship, was successfully imitated, about the same time, by Cowley and Sir William Temple in their miscellaneous Essays, which are very agreeable and learned talking upon

<sup>1</sup> As an instance of his general power of reasoning, I shall give his chapter entitled *One Man's Profit is another's Loss*, in which he has nearly anticipated Mandeville's celebrated paradox of private vices being public benefits:—

" Demades, the Athenian, condemned a fellow-citizen, who furnished out funerals, for demanding too great a price for his goods; and if he got an estate, it must be by the death of a great many people; but I think it a sentence ill grounded, forasmuch as no profit can be made but at the expense of some other person, and that every kind of gain is by that rule liable to be condemned. The tradesman thrives by the debauchery of youth, and the farmer by the dearness of corn; the architect by the ruin of buildings, the officers of justice by quarrels and lawsuits; nay, even the honour and function of divines is owing to our mortality and vices. No physician takes pleasure in the health even of his best friends, said the ancient Greek comedian, nor soldier in the peace of his country; and so of the rest. And, what is yet worse, let every one but examine his own heart, and he will find that his private wishes spring and grow up at the expense of some other person. Upon which consideration this thought came into my head, that Nature does not deviate from her general policy; for that naturalists hold that the birth, nourishment, and increase of any one thing is the decay and corruption of another:—

*Nam quodcunque suis mutatum finibus exit,  
Continuo hoc mors est illius, quod fuit ante.*

'For what from its own confines chang'd doth pass,  
Is straight the death of what before it was.'"

paper. Lord Shaftesbury, on the contrary, who aimed at the same easy, *dégagé* mode of communicating his thoughts to the world, has quite spoiled his matter, which is sometimes valuable, by his manner, in which he carries a certain flaunting, flowery, figurative, flirting style of amicable condescension to the reader, to an excess more tantalizing than the most starched and ridiculous formality of the age of James I. There is nothing so tormenting as the affectation of ease and freedom from affectation.

The ice being thus thawed, and the barrier that kept authors at a distance from common sense and feeling broken through, the transition was not difficult from Montaigne and his imitators to our Periodical Essayists. These last applied the same unrestrained expression of their thoughts to the more immediate and passing scenes of life, to temporary and local matters; and in order to discharge the invidious office of *Censor Morum* more freely, and with less responsibility, assumed some fictitious and humorous disguise, which, however, in a great degree, corresponded to their own peculiar habits and character. By thus concealing their own name and person under the title of the "Tatler," "Spectator," &c., they were enabled to inform us more fully of what was passing in the world, while the dramatic contrast and ironical point of view to which the whole is subjected, added a greater liveliness and piquancy to the descriptions. The philosopher and wit here commences newsmonger, makes himself master of "the perfect spy o' th' time," and from his various walks and turns through life, brings home little curious specimens of the humours, opinions, and manners of his contemporaries, as the botanist brings home different plants and weeds, or the mineralogist different shells and fossils, to illustrate their several theories, and be useful to mankind.

The first of these papers that was attempted in this country was set up by Steele in the beginning of the last century; and of all our Periodical Essayists, the "Tatler" (for that was the name he assumed) has always

appeared to me the most accomplished and agreeable. Montaigne, whom I have proposed to consider as the father of this kind of personal authorship among the moderns, in which the reader is admitted behind the curtain, and sits down with the writer in his gown and slippers, was a most magnanimous and undisguised egotist ; but Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq., was the more disinterested gossip of the two. The French author is contented to describe the peculiarities of his own mind and person, which he does with a most copious and unsparing hand. The English journalist good-naturedly lets you into the secret both of his own affairs and those of his neighbours. A young lady, on the other side of Temple Bar, cannot be seen at her glass for half a day together, but Mr. Bickerstaff takes due notice of it ; and he has the first intelligence of the symptoms of the *belle passion* appearing in any young gentleman at the west end of the town. The departures and arrivals of widows with handsome jointures, either to bury their grief in the country, or to procure a second husband in town, are regularly recorded in his pages. He is well acquainted with the celebrated beauties of the preceding age at the Court of Charles II ; and the old gentleman (as he feigns himself) often grows romantic in recounting "the disastrous strokes which his youth suffered" from the glances of their bright eyes, and their unaccountable caprices. In particular, he dwells with a secret satisfaction on the recollection of one of his mistresses, who left him for a richer rival, and whose constant reproach to her husband, on occasion of any quarrel between them, was "I, that might have married the famous Mr. Bickerstaff, to be treated in this manner !" The club at the Trumpet consists of a set of persons almost as well worth knowing as himself. The cavalcade of the justice of the peace, the knight of the shire, the country squire, and the young gentleman, his nephew, who came to wait on him at his chambers, in such form and ceremony, seem not to have settled the order of their precedence to this hour ; and I should hope that the upholsterer

and his companions, who used to sun themselves in the Green Park, and who broke their rest and fortunes to maintain the balance of power in Europe, stand as fair a chance for immortality as some modern politicians. Mr. Bickerstaff himself is a gentleman and a scholar, a humorist and a man of the world, with a great deal of nice easy *naïveté* about him. If he walks out and is caught in a shower of rain, he makes amends for this unlucky accident by a criticism on the shower in Virgil, and concludes with a burlesque copy of verses on a city shower. He entertains us, when he dates from his own apartment, with a quotation from Plutarch, or a moral reflection ; from the Grecian coffee-house with politics, and from Will's, or the Temple, with the poets and players, the beaux and men of wit and pleasure about town. In reading the pages of the "Tatler," we seem as if suddenly carried back to the age of Queen Anne, of toupees and full-bottomed periwigs. The whole appearance of our dress and manners undergoes a delightful metamorphosis. We are surprised with the rustling of hoops, and the glittering of paste buckles. The beaux and the belles are of a quite different species from what they are at present ; we distinguish the dappers, the smarts, and the pretty fellows, as they pass by Mr. Lilly's shop-windows in the Strand ; we are introduced to Rettenton and Mrs. Oldfield behind the scenes ; are made familiar with the persons and performances of Mr. Penkethman and Mr. Bullock ; we listen to a dispute at a tavern on the merits of the Duke of Marlborough, or Marshal Turenne ; or are present at the first rehearsal of a play by Vanbrugh, or the reading of a new poem by Mr. Pope. The privilege of thus virtually transporting ourselves to past times, is even greater than that of visiting distant places in reality. London a hundred years ago would be much better worth seeing than Paris at the present moment.

It may be said, that all this is to be found, in the same or a greater degree, in the "Spectator." For myself, I do not think so ; or, at least, there is in the last work a much greater proportion of commonplace

matter. I have, on this account, always preferred the "Tatler" to the "Spectator." Whether it is owing to my having been earlier or better acquainted with the one than the other, my pleasure in reading these two admirable works is not at all in proportion to their comparative reputation. The "Tatler" contains only half the number of volumes, and, I will venture to say, at least an equal quantity of sterling wit and sense. "The first sprightly runnings" are there—it has more of the original spirit, more of the freshness and stamp of nature. The indications of character and strokes of humour are more true and frequent; the reflections that suggest themselves arise more from the occasion, and are less spun out into regular dissertations. They are more like the remarks which occur in sensible conversation, and less like a lecture. Something is left to the understanding of the reader. Steele seems to have gone into his closet chiefly to set down what he observed out of doors. Addison seems to have spent most of his time in his study, and to have spun out and wire-drawn the hints, which he borrowed from Steele, or took from nature, to the utmost. I am far from wishing to depreciate Addison's talents, but I am anxious to do justice to Steele, who was, I think, upon the whole, a less artificial and more original writer. The humorous descriptions of Steele resemble loose sketches, or fragments of a comedy; those of Addison are rather comments, or ingenious paraphrases, on the genuine text. The characters of the club not only in the "Tatler," but in the "Spectator," were drawn by Steele. That of Sir Roger de Coverley is among the number. Addison has, however, gained himself immortal honour by his manner of filling up this last character. Who is there that can forget, or be insensible to, the inimitable, nameless graces, and varied traits of nature and of old English character, in it—to his unpretending virtues and amiable weaknesses—to his modesty, generosity, hospitality, and eccentric whims—to the respect of his neighbours, and the affection of his domestics—to his

wayward, hopeless, secret passion for his fair enemy, the widow, in which there is more of real romance and true delicacy than in a thousand tales of knight-errantry—(we perceive the hectic flush of his cheek, the faltering of his tongue in speaking of her bewitching airs and “the whiteness of her hand”)—to the havoc he makes among the game in his neighbourhood—to his speech from the bench, to show the “*Spectator*” what is thought of him in the country—to his unwillingness to be put up as a sign-post, and his having his own likeness turned into the Saracen’s head—to his gentle reproof of the baggage of a gipsy that tells him “he has a widow in his line of life”—to his doubts as to the existence of witchcraft, and protection of reputed witches—to his account of the family pictures, and his choice of a chaplain—to his falling asleep at church, and his reproof of John Williams, as soon as he recovered from his nap, for talking in sermon-time. The characters of Will Wimble and Will Honeycomb are not a whit behind their friend, Sir Roger, in delicacy and felicity. The delightful simplicity and good humoured officiousness in the one are set off by the graceful affectation and courtly pretension in the other. How long since I first became acquainted with these two characters in the “*Spectator*”! What old-fashioned friends they seem, and yet I am not tired of them, like so many other friends, nor they of me! How airy these abstractions of the poet’s pen stream over the dawn of our acquaintance with human life! how they glance their fairest colours on the prospect before us! how pure they remain in it to the last, like the rainbow in the evening cloud, which the rude hand of time can neither soil nor dissipate! What a pity that we cannot find the reality, and yet if we did, the dream would be over. I once thought I knew a Will Wimble and a Will Honeycomb, but they turned out but indifferently: the originals in the “*Spectator*” still read word for word, the same that they always did. We have only to turn to the page, and find them where we left

them!—Many of the most exquisite pieces in the “Tatler,” it is to be observed, are Addison’s, as the “Court of Honour,” and the “Personification of Musical Instruments,” with almost all those papers that form regular sets or series. I do not know whether the picture of the family of an old college acquaintance, in the “Tatler,” where the children run to let Mr. Bickerstaff in at the door, and where the one that loses the race that way, turns back to tell the father that he is come; with the nice gradation of incredulity in the little boy, who is got into “Guy of Warwick,” and the “Seven Champions,” and who shakes his head at the improbability of “Æsop’s Fables,” is Steele’s or Addison’s, though I believe it belongs to the former.<sup>1</sup> The account of the two sisters, one of whom held up her head higher than ordinary, from having on a pair of flowered garters, and that of the married lady who complained to the “Tatler” of the neglect of her husband, with her answers to some *home* questions that were put to her, are unquestionably Steele’s. If the “Tatler” is not inferior to the “Spectator” as a record of manners and character, it is very superior to it in the interest of many of the stories. Several of the incidents related there by Steele have never been surpassed in the heart-rending pathos of private distress. I might refer to those of the lover and his mistress, when the theatre, in which they were, caught fire; of the bridegroom, who by accident kills his bride on the day of their marriage; the story of Mr. Eustace and his wife; and the fine dream about his own mistress when a youth. What has given its superior reputation to the

<sup>1</sup> It is Steele’s; and the whole paper (No. 95), observes Mr. Leigh Hunt, is in his most delightful manner. The dream about the mistress, however, is given to Addison by the editors, and the general style of that number is his; though, from the story’s being related personally of Bickerstaff, who is also represented as having been at that time in the army, we conclude it to have originally come from Steele, perhaps in the course of conversation. The particular incident is much more like a story of his than of Addison’s.

"Spectator," is the greater gravity of its pretensions, its moral dissertations and critical reasonings, by which I confess myself less edified than by other things, which are thought more lightly of. Systems and opinions change, but nature is always true. It is the extremely moral and didactic tone of the "Spectator" which makes us apt to think of Addison (according to Mandeville's sarcasm) as "a parson in a tie-wig." Many of his moral Essays are, however, exquisitely beautiful and happy. Such are the reflections on cheerfulness, those in Westminster Abbey, on the Royal Exchange, and particularly some very affecting ones on the death of a young lady in the fourth volume. These, it must be allowed, are the perfection of elegant sermonizing. His critical Essays are not so good. I prefer Steele's occasional selection of beautiful poetical passages, without any affectation of analysing their beauties, to Addison's fine-spun theories. The best criticism in the "Spectator," that on the Cartoons of Raphael, of which Mr. Fuseli has availed himself with great spirit in his Lectures, is by Steele.<sup>1</sup> I owed this acknowledgment to a writer who has so often put me in good humour with myself, and everything about me, when few things else could, and when the tomes of casuistry and ecclesiastical history, with which the little duodecimo volumes of the "Tatler" were overwhelmed and surrounded, in the only library to which I had access when a boy, had tried their tranquillizing effects upon me in vain. I had not long ago in my hands, by favour of a friend, an original copy of the quarto edition of the "Tatler," with a list of the subscribers. It is curious to see some names there which we should hardly think of (that of Sir Isaac Newton is among them), and also to observe the degree of interest excited by those of the different persons, which is not determined according

<sup>1</sup> The antithetical style and verbal paradoxes which Burke was so fond of, in which the epithet is a seeming contradiction to the substantive, such as "proud submission" and "dignified obedience," are, I think, first to be found in the "Tatler."

to the rules of the Heralds' College. One literary name lasts as long as a whole race of heroes and their descendants ! The "Guardian," which followed the "Spectator," was, as may be supposed, inferior to it.

The dramatic and conversational turn which forms the distinguishing feature and greatest charm of the "Spectator" and "Tatler," is quite lost in the "Rambler," by Dr. Johnson. There is no reflected light thrown on human life from an assumed character, nor any direct one from a display of the author's own. The "Tatler" and "Spectator" are, as it were, made up of notes and memorandums of the events and incidents of the day, with finished studies after nature, and characters fresh from the life, which the writer moralizes upon, and turns to account as they come before him. The "Rambler" is a collection of moral Essays, or scholastic theses, written on set subjects, and of which the individual characters and incidents are merely artificial illustrations, brought in to give a pretended relief to the dryness of didactic discussion. The "Rambler" is a splendid and imposing commonplace-book of general topics, and rhetorical declamation on the conduct and business of human life. In this sense, there is hardly a reflection that had been suggested on such subjects which is not to be found in this celebrated work, and there is, perhaps, hardly a reflection to be found in it which had not been already suggested and developed by some other author, or in the common course of conversation. The mass of intellectual wealth here heaped together is immense, but it is rather the result of gradual accumulation, the produce of the general intellect, labouring in the mine of knowledge and reflection, than dug out of the quarry, and dragged into the light by the industry and sagacity of a single mind. I am not here saying that Dr. Johnson was a man without originality, compared with the ordinary run of men's minds, but he was not a man of original thought or genius, in the sense in which Montaigne or Lord Bacon was. He opened no new vein of precious ore, nor did he

light upon any single pebbles of uncommon size and unrivalled lustre. We seldom meet with anything to "give us pause"; he does not set us thinking for the first time. His reflections present themselves like reminiscences; do not disturb the ordinary march of our thoughts; arrest our attention by the stateliness of their appearance, and the costliness of their garb, but pass on and mingle with the throng of our impressions. After closing the volumes of the "Rambler," there is nothing that we remember as a new truth gained to the mind, nothing indelibly stamped upon the memory; nor is there any passage that we wish to turn to as embodying any known principle or observation, with such force and beauty that justice can only be done to the idea in the author's own words. Such, for instance, are many of the passages to be found in Burke, which shine by their own light, belong to no class, have neither equal nor counterpart, and of which we say that no one but the author could have written them! There is neither the same boldness of design nor mastery of execution in Johnson. In the one, the spark of genius seems to have met with its congenial matter: the shaft is sped: the forked lightning dresses up the face of nature in ghastly smiles, and the loud thunder rolls far away from the ruin that is made. Dr. Johnson's style, on the contrary, resembles rather the rumbling of mimic thunder at one of our theatres; and the light he throws upon a subject is like the dazzling effect of phosphorus, or an *ignis fatuus* of words. There is a wide difference, however, between perfect originality and perfect commonplace: neither ideas nor expressions are trite or vulgar because they are not quite new. They are valuable, and ought to be repeated, if they have not become quite common; and Johnson's style both of reasoning and imagery holds the middle rank between startling novelty and vapid commonplace. Johnson has as much originality of thinking as Addison; but then he wants his familiarity of illustration, knowledge of character, and delightful humour.—What most dis-

tinguishes Dr. Johnson from other writers, is the pomp and uniformity of his style. All his periods are cast in the same mould, are of the same size and shape, and consequently have little fitness to the variety of things he professes to treat of. His subjects are familiar, but the author is always upon stilts. He has neither ease nor simplicity, and his efforts at playfulness, in part, remind one of the lines in Milton :—

“ ————— The elephant  
To make them sport wreath'd his proboscis lithe.”

His “Letters from Correspondents,” in particular, are more pompous and unwieldy than what he writes in his own person. This want of relaxation and variety of manner has, I think, after the first effects of novelty and surprise were over, been prejudicial to the matter. It takes from the general power, not only to please, but to instruct. The monotony of style produces an apparent monotony of ideas. What is really striking and valuable, is lost in the vain ostentation and circumlocution of the expression ; for when we find the same pains and pomp of diction bestowed upon the most trifling as upon the most important parts of a sentence or discourse, we grow tired of distinguishing between pretension and reality, and are disposed to confound the tinsel and bombast of the phraseology with want of weight in the thoughts. Thus, from the imposing and oracular nature of the style, people are tempted at first to imagine that our author's speculations are all wisdom and profundity : till having found out their mistake in some instances, they suppose that there is nothing but commonplace in them, concealed under verbiage and pedantry ; and in both they are wrong. The fault of Dr. Johnson's style is, that it reduces all things to the same artificial and unmeaning level. It destroys all shades of difference, the association between words and things. It is a perpetual paradox and innovation. He condescends to the familiar till we are ashamed of our interest in it : he expands the little till it looks big. “ If he were to write a fable of little fishes,” as Goldsmith said of him,

"he would make them speak like great whales." We can no more distinguish the most familiar objects in his descriptions of them, than we can a well-known face under a huge painted mask. The structure of his sentences, which was his own invention, and which has been generally imitated since his time, is a species of rhyming in prose, where one clause answers to another in measure and quantity, like the tagging of syllables at the end of a verse ; the close of the period follows as mechanically as the oscillation of a pendulum, the sense is balanced with the sound ; each sentence, revolving round its centre of gravity, is contained within itself like a couplet, and each paragraph forms itself into a stanza. Dr. Johnson is also a complete balance-master in the topics of morality. He never encourages hope, but he counteracts it by fear ; he never elicits a truth, but he suggests some objection in answer to it. He seizes and alternately quits the clue of reason, lest it should involve him in the labyrinths of endless error : he wants confidence in himself and his fellows. He dares not trust himself with the immediate impressions of things, for fear of compromising his dignity ; or follow them into their consequences, for fear of committing his prejudices. His timidity is the result, not of ignorance, but of morbid apprehension. "He turns the great circle, and is still at home." No advance is made by his writings in any sentiment, or mode of reasoning. Out of the pale of established authority and received dogmas, all is sceptical, loose, and desultory : he seems in imagination to strengthen the dominion of prejudice, as he weakens and dissipates that of reason ; and round the rock of faith and power, on the edge of which he slumbers blindfold and uneasy, the waves and billows of uncertain and dangerous opinion roar and heave for evermore. His "*Rasselas*" is the most melancholy and debilitating moral speculation that ever was put forth. Doubtful of the faculties of his mind, as of his organs of vision, Johnson trusted only to his feelings and his fears. He cultivated a belief in witches as an out-guard to the evidences of

religion ; and abused Milton, and patronized Lauder, in spite of his aversion to his countrymen, as a step to secure the existing establishment in Church and State. This was neither right feeling nor sound logic.

The most triumphant record of the talents and character of Johnson is to be found in Boswell's life of him. The man was superior to the author. When he threw aside his pen, which he regarded as an encumbrance, he became not only learned and thoughtful, but acute, witty, humorous, natural, honest; hearty and determined, "the king of good fellows and wale of old men." There are as many smart repartees, profound remarks, and keen invectives to be found in Boswell's "inventory of all he said," as are recorded of any celebrated man. The life and dramatic play of his conversation forms a contrast to his written works. His natural powers and undisguised opinions were called out in convivial intercourse. In public, he practised with the foils : in private, he unsheathed the sword of controversy, and it was "the Ebro's temper." The eagerness of opposition roused him from his natural sluggishness and acquired timidity ; he returned blow for blow ; and whether the trial were of argument or wit, none of his rivals could boast much of the encounter. Burke seems to have been the only person who had a chance with him ; and it is the unpardonable sin of Boswell's work, that he has purposely omitted their combats of strength and skill. Goldsmith asked, "Does he wind into a subject like a serpent, as Burke does?" And when exhausted with sickness, he himself said, "If that fellow Burke were here now, he would kill me." It is to be observed, that Johnson's colloquial style was as blunt, direct, and downright, as his style of studied composition was involved and circuitous. As when Topham, Beauclerc, and Langton knocked him up at his chambers at three in the morning, and he came to the door with the poker in his hand, but seeing them, exclaimed, "What ! is it you, my lads ? Then I'll have a frisk with you !" and he afterwards reproaches

Langton, who was a literary milksop, for leaving them to go to an engagement "with some *un-ideal* girls." What words to come from the mouth of the great moralist and lexicographer ! His good deeds were as many as his good sayings. His domestic habits, his tenderness to servants, and readiness to oblige his friends ; the quantity of strong tea that he drank to keep down sad thoughts ; his many labours reluctantly begun, and irresolutely laid aside ; his honest acknowledgment of his own, and indulgence to the weaknesses of others ; his throwing himself back in the post-chaise with Boswell, and saying, "Now I think I am a good-humoured fellow," though nobody thought him so, and yet he was ; his quitting the society of Garrick and his actresses, and his reason for it, his dining with Wilkes, and his kindness to Goldsmith ; his sitting with the young ladies on his knee at the Mitre, to give them good advice, in which situation, if not explained, he might be taken for Falstaff ; and last and noblest, his carrying the unfortunate victim of disease and dissipation on his back up through Fleet Street (an act which realizes the parable of the good Samaritan)—all these, and innumerable others, endear him to the reader, and must be remembered to his lasting honour. He had faults, but they lie buried with him. He had his prejudices and his intolerant feelings, but he suffered enough in the conflict of his own mind with them ; for if no man can be happy in the free exercise of his reason, no wise man can be happy without it. His were not time-serving, heartless, hypocritical prejudices ; but deep, inwoven, not to be rooted out but with life and hope, which he found from old habit necessary to his own peace of mind, and thought so to the peace of mankind. I do not hate, but love him for them. They were between himself and his conscience, and should be left to that higher tribunal

"Where they in trembling hope repose,  
The bosom of his father and his God."

In a word, he has left behind him few wiser or better men.

The herd of his imitators showed what he was by their disproportionate effects. The Periodical Essayists that succeeded the "Rambler" are, and deserve to be, little read at present. "The Adventurer," by Hawksworth, is completely trite and vapid, aping all the faults of Johnson's style, without anything to atone for them. The sentences are often absolutely unmeaning ; and one-half of each might regularly be left blank. "The World," and "Connoisseur," which followed, are a little better ; and in the last of these there is one good idea, that of a man in indifferent health who judges of every one's title to respect from their possession of this blessing, and bows to a sturdy beggar with sound limbs and a florid complexion, while he turns his back upon a lord who is a valetudinarian.

Goldsmith's "Citizen of the World," like all his works, bears the stamp of the author's mind. It does not "go about to cozen reputation without the stamp of merit." He is more observing, more original, more natural and picturesque than Johnson. His work is written on the model of the "Persian Letters," and contrives to give an abstracted and somewhat perplexing view of things, by opposing foreign prepossessions to our own, and thus stripping objects of their customary disguises. Whether truth is elicited in this collision of contrary absurdities, I do not know ; but I confess the process is too ambiguous and full of intricacy to be very amusing to my plain understanding. For light summer reading it is like walking in a garden full of traps and pitfalls. It necessarily gives rise to paradoxes, and there are some very bold ones in the "Essays," which would subject an author less established to no very agreeable sort of *censura literaria*. Thus the Chinese philosopher exclaims very unadvisedly, "The bonzes and priests of all religions keep up superstition and imposture ; all reformatioins begin with the laity." Goldsmith, however, was staunch

in his practical creed, and might bolt speculative extravagances with impunity. There is a striking difference in this respect between him and Addison, who, if he attacked authority, took care to have common sense on his side, and never hazarded anything offensive to the feelings of others, or on the strength of his own discretionary opinion. There is another inconvenience in this assumption of an exotic character and tone of sentiment, that it produces an inconsistency between the knowledge which the individual has time to acquire and which the author is bound to communicate. Thus the Chinese has not been in England three days before he is acquainted with the characters of the three countries which compose this kingdom, and describes them to his friend at Canton by extracts from the newspapers of each metropolis. The nationality of Scotchmen is thus ridiculed :—

*"Edinburgh.—We are positive when we say that Sanders Macgregor, lately executed for horse-stealing, is not a native of Scotland, but born at Carrickfergus."*

Now this is very good ; but how should our Chinese philosopher find it out by instinct ? Beau Tibbs, a prominent character in this little work, is the best comic sketch since the time of Addison ; unrivalled in his finery, his vanity, and his poverty.

I have only to mention the names of the "Lounger" and the "Mirror," which are ranked by the author's admirers with Sterne for sentiment, and with Addison for humour. I shall not enter into that ; but I know that the story of "La Roche" is not like the story of "Le Fevre," nor one hundredth part so good. Do I say this from prejudice to the author ? No ; for I have read his novels. Of "The Man of the World" I cannot think so favourably as some others ; nor shall I here dwell on the picturesque and romantic beauties of "Julia de Roubigne," the early favourite of the author of "Rosamond Gray" ; but of the "Man of Feeling" I would speak with grateful recollections ; nor is it

possible to forget the sensitive, irresolute, interesting Harley ; and that lone figure of Miss Walton in it, that floats in the horizon, dim and ethereal, the day-dream of her lover's youthful fancy—better, far better, than all the realities of life !

## LECTURE VI

## ON THE ENGLISH NOVELISTS

THERE is an exclamation in one of Gray's letters—"Be mine to read eternal new romances of Marivaux and Crebillon!" If I did not utter a similar aspiration at the conclusion of the last new novel which I read (I would not give offence by being more particular as to the name) it was not from any want of affection for the class of writing to which it belongs; for without going so far as the celebrated French philosopher, who thought that more was to be learnt from good novels and romances than from the gravest treatises on history and morality, yet there are few works to which I am oftener tempted to turn for profit or delight, than to the standard productions in this species of composition. We find there a close imitation of men and manners; we see the very web and texture of society as it really exists, and as we meet with it when we come into the world. If poetry has "something more divine in it," this savours more of humanity. We are brought acquainted with the motives and characters of mankind, imbibe our notions of virtue and vice from practical examples, and are taught a knowledge of the world through the airy medium of romance. As a record of past manners and opinions, too, such writings afford the best and fullest information. For example, I should be at a loss where to find in any authentic documents of the same period so satisfactory an account of the general state of society, and of moral, political, and religious feeling in the reign of George II as we meet with in the "*Adventures of Joseph Andrews*" and his friend Mr. Abraham Adams. This work, indeed, I take to be a perfect piece of statistics in its kind. In looking into any regular

history of that period, into a learned and eloquent charge to a grand jury or the clergy of a diocese, or into a tract on controversial divinity, we should hear only of the ascendancy of the Protestant succession, the horrors of Popery, the triumph of civil and religious liberty, the wisdom and moderation of the sovereign, the happiness of the subject, and the flourishing state of manufactures and commerce. But if we really wish to know what all these fine-sounding names come to, we cannot do better than turn to the works of those who, having no other object than to imitate nature, could only hope for success from the fidelity of their pictures ; and were bound (in self-defence) to reduce the boasts of vague theorists and the exaggerations of angry disputants to the mortifying standard of reality. Extremes are said to meet ; and the works of imagination, as they are called, sometimes come the nearest to truth and nature. Fielding, in speaking on this subject, and vindicating the use and dignity of the style of writing in which he excelled against the loftier pretensions of professed historians, says, "that in their productions nothing is true but the names and dates, whereas in his everything is true but the names and dates." If so, he has the advantage on his side.

I will here confess, however, that I am a little prejudiced on the point in question ; and that the effect of many fine speculations has been lost upon me, from an early familiarity with the most striking passages in the work to which I have just alluded. Thus nothing can be more captivating than the description somewhere given by Mr. Burke of the indissoluble connexion between learning and nobility, and of the respect universally paid by wealth to piety and morals. But the effect of this ideal representation has always been spoiled by my recollection of Parson Adams sitting over his cup of ale in Sir Thomas Booby's kitchen. Echard "On the Contempt of the Clergy" is, in like manner, a very good book, and "worthy of all acceptance"; but somehow an unlucky impression of the reality of Parson Trulliber involuntarily checks the

emotions of respect to which it might otherwise give rise ; while, on the other hand, the lecture which Lady Booby reads to Lawyer Scout on the immediate expulsion of Joseph and Fanny from the parish, casts no very favourable light on the flattering accounts of our practical jurisprudence which are to be found in Blackstone or De Lolme. The most moral writers, after all, are those who do not pretend to inculcate any moral. The professed moralist almost unavoidably degenerates into the partisan of a system ; and the philosopher is too apt to warp the evidence to his own purpose. But the painter of manners gives the facts of human nature, and leaves us to draw the inference ; if we are not able to do this, or do it ill, at least it is our own fault.

The first-rate writers in this class, of course, are few ; but those few we may reckon among the greatest ornaments and best benefactors of our kind. There is a certain set of them who, as it were, take their rank by the side of reality, and are appealed to as evidence on all questions concerning human nature. The principal of these are Cervantes and Le Sage, who may be considered as having been naturalized among ourselves ; and, of native English growth, Fielding, Smollett, Richardson, and Sterne.<sup>1</sup> As this is a department of criticism which deserves more attention than has been usually bestowed upon it, I shall here venture to recur (not from choice but necessity) to what I have said upon it in a well-known periodical publication ;<sup>2</sup> and endeavour to contribute my mite towards settling the standard of excellence, both as to degree and kind, in these several writers.

I shall begin with the history of the renowned "Don Quixote de la Mancha," who presents something more stately, more romantic, and at the same time more real

<sup>1</sup> It is not to be forgotten that the author of "Robinson Crusoe" was also an Englishman. His other works, such as the "Life of Colonel Jack," &c., are of the same cast, and leave an impression on the mind more like that of things than words.

<sup>2</sup> The *Edinburgh Review*.

to the imagination, than any other hero upon record. His lineaments, his accoutrements, his pasteboard vizor, are familiar to us ; and Mambrino's helmet still glitters in the sun ! We not only feel the greatest love and veneration for the knight himself, but a certain respect for all those connected with him, the curate and Master Nicolas the barber, Sancho and Dapple, and even for Rosinante's leanness and his errors.—Perhaps there is no work which combines so much whimsical invention with such an air of truth. Its popularity is almost unequalled ; and yet its merits have not been sufficiently understood. The story is the least part of them ; though the blunders of Sancho, and the unlucky adventures of his master, are what naturally catch the attention of the majority of readers. The pathos and dignity of the sentiments are often disguised under the ludicrousness of the subject, and provoke laughter when they might well draw tears. The character of Don Quixote himself is one of the most perfect disinterestedness. He is an enthusiast of the most amiable kind ; of a nature equally open, gentle, and generous ; a lover of truth and justice ; and one who had brooded over the fine dreams of chivalry and romance, till they had robbed him of himself, and cheated his brain into a belief of their reality. There cannot be a greater mistake than to consider "Don Quixote" as a merely satirical work, or as a vulgar attempt to explode "the long-forgotten order of chivalry." There could be no need to explode what no longer existed. Besides, Cervantes himself was a man of the most sanguine and enthusiastic temperament ; and even through the crazed and battered figure of the knight, the spirit of chivalry shines out with undiminished lustre ; as if the author had half-designed to revive the examples of past ages, and once more "witch the world with noble horsemanship." Oh ! if ever the mouldering flame of Spanish liberty is destined to break forth, wrapping the tyrant and the tyranny in one consuming blaze, that the spark of generous sentiment and romantic enterprise,

from which it must be kindled, has not been quite extinguished, will perhaps be owing to thee, Cervantes, and to thy "Don Quixote"!

The character of Sancho is not more admirable in itself, than as a relief to that of the knight. The contrast is as picturesque and striking as that between the figures of Rosinante and Dapple. Never was there so complete a *partie quarrée* :—they answer to one another at all points. Nothing need surpass the truth of physiognomy in the description of the master and man, both as to body and mind ; the one lean and tall, the other round and short ; the one heroical and courteous, the other selfish and servile ; the one full of high-flown fancies, the other a bag of proverbs ; the one always starting some romantic scheme, the other trying to keep to the safe side of custom and tradition. The gradual ascendancy, however, obtained by Don Quixote over Sancho, is as finely managed as it is characteristic. Credulity and a love of the marvellous are as natural to ignorance as selfishness and cunning. Sancho by degrees becomes a kind of lay-brother of the order ; acquires a taste for adventures in his own way, and is made all but an entire convert by the discovery of the hundred crowns in one of his most comfortless journeys. Towards the end, his regret at being forced to give up the pursuit of knight-errantry, almost equals his master's ; and he seizes the proposal of Don Quixote for them to turn shepherds with the greatest avidity —still applying it in his own fashion ; for while the Don is ingeniously torturing the names of his humble acquaintance into classical terminations, and contriving scenes of gallantry and song, Sancho exclaims, "Oh, what delicate wooden spoons shall I carve ! what crumbs and cream shall I devour !" —forgetting, in his milk and fruits, the pullets and geese at Camacho's wedding.

This intuitive perception of the hidden analogies of things, or, as it may be called, this *instinct of the imagination*, is, perhaps, what stamps the character of genius on the productions of art more than any other

circumstance : for it works unconsciously, like nature, and receives its impressions from a kind of inspiration. There is as much of this indistinct keeping and involuntary unity of purpose in Cervantes as in any author whatever. Something of the same unsettled, rambling humour extends itself to all the subordinate parts and characters of the work. Thus we find the curate confidentially informing Don Quixote, that if he could get the ear of the government, he has something of considerable importance to propose for the good of the State ; and our adventurer afterwards (in the course of his peregrinations) meets with a young gentleman who is a candidate for poetical honours, with a mad lover, a forsaken damsel, a Mahometan lady converted to the Christian faith, &c.—all delineated with the same truth, wildness, and delicacy of fancy. The whole work breathes that air of romance, that aspiration after imaginary good, that indescribable longing after something more than we possess, that in all places and in all conditions of life,

“ — still prompts the eternal sigh,  
For which we wish to live, or dare to die ! ”

The leading characters in “Don Quixote” are strictly individuals ; that is, they do not so much belong to, as form a class by themselves. In other words, the actions and manners of the chief *dramatis personæ* do not arise out of the actions and manners of those around them, or the situation of life in which they are placed, but out of the peculiar dispositions of the persons themselves, operated upon by certain impulses of caprice and accident. Yet these impulses are so true to nature, and their operation so exactly described, that we not only recognize the fidelity of the representation, but recognize it with all the advantages of novelty superadded. They are in the best sense *originals*, namely, in the sense in which Nature has her originals. They are unlike anything we have seen before—may be said to be purely ideal ; and yet identify themselves more readily with our

imagination, and are retained more strongly in memory, than perhaps any others : they are never lost in the crowd. One test of the truth of this ideal painting is the number of allusions which "Don Quixote" has furnished to the whole of civilized Europe ; that is to say, of appropriate cases and striking illustrations of the universal principles of our nature. The detached incidents and occasional descriptions of human life are more familiar and obvious ; so that we have nearly the same insight here given us into the characters of innkeepers, barmaids, ostlers, and puppet-show men, than we have in Fielding. There is a much greater mixture, however, of the pathetic and sentimental with the quaint and humorous, than there ever is in Fielding. I might instance the story of the countryman whom Don Quixote and Sancho met in their doubtful search after Dulcinea, driving his mules to plough at break of day, and "singing the ancient ballad of Roncesvalles" ! The episodes, which are frequently introduced, are excellent, but have, upon the whole, been overrated. They derive their interest from their connexion with the main story. We are so pleased with that, that we are disposed to receive pleasure from everything else. Compared, for instance, with the serious tales in Boccaccio, they are slight and somewhat superficial. That of Marcella, the fair shepherdess, is, I think, the best. I shall only add, that "Don Quixote" was, at the time it was published, an entirely original work in its kind, and that the author claims the highest honour which can belong to one, that of being the inventor of a new style of writing. I have never read his "Galatea," nor his "Loves of Persiles and Sigismunda," though I have often meant to do it, and I hope to do so yet. Perhaps there is a reason lurking at the bottom of this dilatoriness : I am quite sure the reading of these works could not make me think higher of the author of "Don Quixote," and it might, for a moment or two, make me think less.

There is another Spanish novel, "Guzman d'Alfa-

rache," nearly of the same age as "Don Quixote," and of great genius, though it can hardly be ranked as a novel or a work of imagination. It is a series of strange, unconnected adventures, rather drily told, but accompanied by the most severe and sarcastic commentary. The satire, the wit, the eloquence, and reasoning, are of the most potent kind: but they are didactic rather than dramatic. They would suit a homily or a pasquinade as well or better than a romance. Still there are in this extraordinary book occasional sketches of character and humorous descriptions, to which it would be difficult to produce anything superior. This work, which is hardly known in this country except by name, has the credit, without any reason, of being the original of "Gil Blas." There is one incident the same, that of the unsavoury ragout, which is served up for supper at the inn. In all other respects these two works are the very reverse of each other, both in their excellences and defects.—"Lazarillo de Tormes" has been more read than the "Spanish Rogue," and is a work more readable, on this account among others, that it is contained in a duodecimo instead of a folio volume. This, however, is long enough, considering that it treats of only one subject, that of eating, or rather the possibility of living without eating. Famine is here framed into an art, and feasting is banished far hence. The hero's time and thoughts are taken up in a thousand shifts to procure a dinner; and that failing, in tampering with his stomach till supper time, when being forced to go supperless to bed, he comforts himself with the hopes of a breakfast the next morning, of which being again disappointed, he reserves his appetite for a luncheon, and then has to stave it off again by some meagre excuse or other till dinner; and so on, by a perpetual adjournment of this necessary process, through the four-and-twenty hours round. The quantity of food proper to keep body and soul together is reduced to a *minimum*; and the most uninviting

morsels with which Lazarillo meets once a week as a godsend, are pampered into the most sumptuous fare by a long course of inanition. The scene of this novel could be laid nowhere so properly as in Spain, that land of priestcraft and poverty, where hunger seems to be the ruling passion, and starving the order of the day.

"Gil Blas" has, next to "Don Quixote," been more generally read and admired than any other novel; and in one sense deservedly so: for it is at the head of its class, though that class is very different from, and I should say inferior to the other. There is little individual character in "Gil Blas." The author is a describer of manners, and not of character. He does not take the elements of human nature, and work them up into new combinations (which is the excellence of "Don Quixote"); nor trace the peculiar and shifting shades of folly and knavery as they are to be found in real life (like Fielding): but he takes off, as it were, the general, habitual impression which circumstances make on certain conditions of life, and moulds all his characters accordingly. All the persons whom he introduces carry about with them the badge of their profession, and you see little more of them than their costume. He describes men as belonging to distinct classes in society; not as they are in themselves, or with the individual differences which are always to be discovered in nature. His hero, in particular, has no character but that of the successive circumstances in which he is placed. His priests are only described as priests: his valets, his players, his women, his courtiers and his sharpers, are all alike. Nothing can well exceed the monotony of the work in this respect:—at the same time that nothing can exceed the truth and precision with which the general manners of these different characters are preserved, nor the felicity of the particular traits by which their common foibles are brought out. Thus the Archbishop of Grenada will remain an everlasting memento of the weakness of human vanity; and the account of Gil Blas' legacy, of

the uncertainty of human expectations. This novel is also deficient in the fable as well as in the characters. It is not a regularly constructed story ; but a series of amusing adventures told with equal gaiety and good sense, and in the most graceful style imaginable.

It has been usual to class our own great novelists as imitators of one or other of these two writers. Fielding, no doubt, is more like "Don Quixote" than "Gil Blas"; Smollett is more like "Gil Blas" than "Don Quixote"; but there is not much resemblance in either case. Sterne's "Tristram Shandy" is a more direct instance of imitation. Richardson can scarcely be called an imitator of any one ; or if he is, it is of the sentimental refinement of Marivaux, or of the verbose gallantry of the writers of the seventeenth century.

There is very little to warrant the common idea that Fielding was an imitator of Cervantes, except his own declaration of such an intention in the title-page of "Joseph Andrews," the romantic turn of the character of Parson Adams (the only romantic character in his works), and the proverbial humour of Partridge, which is kept up only for a few pages. Fielding's novels are, in general, thoroughly his own ; and they are thoroughly English. What they are most remarkable for, is neither sentiment, nor imagination, nor wit, nor even humour, though there is an immense deal of this last quality ; but profound knowledge of human nature, at least of English nature, and masterly pictures of the characters of men as he saw them existing. This quality distinguishes all his works, and is shown almost equally in all of them. As a painter of real life, he was equal to Hogarth ; as a mere observer of human nature, he was little inferior to Shakespeare, though without any of the genius and poetical qualities of his mind. His humour is less rich and laughable than Smollett's ; his wit as often misses as hits ; he has none of the fine pathos of Richardson or Sterne ; but he has brought together a greater variety of characters in common life, marked with more distinct peculiarities, and without an atom of caricature, than any other

novel-writer whatever. The extreme subtlety of observation on the springs of human conduct in ordinary characters, is only equalled by the ingenuity of contrivance in bringing those springs into play, in such a manner as to lay open their smallest irregularity. The detection is always complete, and made with the certainty and skill of a philosophical experiment, and the obviousness and familiarity of a casual observation. The truth of the imitation is indeed so great, that it has been argued that Fielding must have had his materials ready-made to his hands, and was merely a transcriber of local manners and individual habits. For this conjecture, however, there seems to be no foundation. His representations, it is true, are local and individual ; but they are not the less profound and conclusive. The feeling of the general principles of human nature operating in particular circumstances, is always intense, and uppermost in his mind ; and he makes use of incident and situation only to bring out character.

It is scarcely necessary to give any illustrations. "Tom Jones" is full of them. There is the account, for example, of the gratitude of the Elder Blifil to his brother, for assisting him to obtain the fortune of Miss Bridget Alworthy by marriage ; and of the gratitude of the poor in his neighbourhood to Alworthy himself, who had done so much good in the country that he had made every one in it his enemy. There is the account of the Latin dialogues between Partridge and his maid, of the assault made on him during one of these by Mrs. Partridge, and the severe bruises he patiently received on that occasion, after which the parish of Little Baddington rung with the story, that the schoolmaster had killed his wife. There is the exquisite keeping in the character of Blifil, and the want of it in that of Jones. There is the gradation in the lovers of Molly Seagrim, the philosopher Square succeeding to Tom Jones, who again finds that he himself had succeeded to the accomplished Will Barnes who had the first possession of her person, and had still possession of her heart, Jones being only the instrument of her vanity, as Square was of her

interest. Then there is the discreet honesty of Black George, the learning of Thwackum and Square, and the profundity of Squire Western, who considered it as a physical impossibility that his daughter should fall in love with Tom Jones. We have also that gentleman's disputes with his sister, and the inimitable appeal of that lady to her niece : "I was never so handsome as you, Sophy ; yet I had something of you formerly. I was called the cruel Parthenissa. Kingdoms and states, as Tully Cicero says, undergo alteration, and so must the human form !" The adventure of the same lady with the highwayman, who robbed her of her jewels while he complimented her beauty, ought not to be passed over ; nor that of Sophia and her muff, nor the reserved coquetry of her cousin Fitzpatrick, nor the description of Lady Bellaston, nor the modest overtures of the pretty widow Hunt, nor the indiscreet babblings of Mrs. Honour. The moral of this book has been objected to without much reason ; but a more serious objection has been made to the want of refinement and elegance in two principal characters. We never feel this objection, indeed, while we are reading the book ; but at other times we have something like a lurking suspicion that Jones was but an awkward fellow, and Sophia a pretty simpleton. I do not know how to account for this effect, unless it is that Fielding's constantly assuring us of the beauty of his hero, and the good sense of his heroine, at last produces a distrust of both. The story of "Tom Jones" is allowed to be unrivalled ; and it is this circumstance, together with the vast variety of characters, that has given the "History of a Foundling" so decided a preference over Fielding's other novels. The characters themselves, both in "Amelia" and "Joseph Andrews," are quite equal to any of those in "Tom Jones." The account of Miss Matthews and Ensign Hibbert in the former of these, —the way in which that lady reconciles herself to the death of her father,—the inflexible Colonel Bath, the insipid Mrs. James, the complaisant Colonel Trent,

the demure, sly, intriguing, equivocal Mrs. Bennet, the lord who is her seducer, and who attempts afterwards to seduce Amelia by the same mechanical process of a concert-ticket, a book, and the disguise of a great-coat,—his little, fat, short-nosed, red-faced, good-humoured accomplice, the keeper of the lodging-house, who, having no pretensions to gallantry herself, has a disinterested delight in forwarding the intrigues and pleasures of others (to say nothing of honest Atkinson, the story of the miniature-picture of Amelia, and the hashed mutton, which are in a different style), are masterpieces of description. The whole scene at the lodging-house, the masquerade, &c., in "Amelia," are equal in interest to the parallel scenes in "Tom Jones," and even more refined in the knowledge of character. For instance, Mrs. Bennet is superior to Mrs. Fitzpatrick in her own way. The uncertainty in which the event of her interview with her former seducer is left, is admirable. Fielding was a master of what may be called the *double entendre* of character, and surprises you no less by what he leaves in the dark (hardly known to the persons themselves) than by the unexpected discoveries he makes of the real traits and circumstances in a character with which, till then, you find you were unacquainted. There is nothing at all heroic, however, in the usual style of his delineations. He does not draw lofty characters or strong passions; all his persons are of the ordinary stature as to intellect, and possess little elevation of fancy, or energy of purpose. Perhaps, after all, Parson Adams is his finest character. It is equally true to nature and more ideal than any of the others. Its unsuspecting simplicity makes it not only more amiable, but doubly amusing, by gratifying the sense of superior sagacity in the reader. Our laughing at him does not once lessen our respect for him. His declaring that he would willingly walk ten miles to fetch his sermon on vanity, merely to convince Wilson of his thorough contempt of this vice, and his consoling himself for the loss of his *Aeschylus* by suddenly

recollecting that he could not read it if he had it, because it is dark, are among the finest touches of *naïveté*. The night adventures at Lady Booby's with Beau Didapper and the amiable Slipslop are the most ludicrous ; and that with the huntsman, who draws off the hounds from the poor parson because they would be spoiled by following *vermin*, the most profound. Fielding did not often repeat himself, but Dr. Harrison, in "Amelia," may be considered as a variation of the character of Adams ; so also is Goldsmith's "Vicar of Wakefield" ; and the latter part of that work, which sets out so delightfully, an almost entire plagiarism from Wilson's account of himself, and Adams's domestic history.

Smollett's first novel, "Roderick Random," which is also his best, appeared about the same time as Fielding's "Tom Jones," and yet it has a much more modern air with it ; but this may be accounted for from the circumstance that Smollett was quite a young man at the time, whereas Fielding's manner must have been formed long before. The style of "Roderick Random" is more easy and flowing than that of "Tom Jones" ; the incidents follow one another more rapidly (though, it must be confessed, they never come in such a throng, or are brought out with the same dramatic effect) ; the humour is broader, and as effectual ; and there is very nearly, if not quite, an equal interest excited by the story. What, then, is it that gives the superiority to Fielding ? It is the superior insight into the springs of human character, and the constant development of that character through every change of circumstance. Smollett's humour often arises from the situation of the persons, or the peculiarity of their external appearance ; as, from Roderick Random's carroty locks, which hung down over his shoulders like a pound of candles, or Strap's ignorance of London, and the blunders that follow from it. There is a tone of vulgarity about all his productions. The incidents frequently resemble detached anecdotes taken from a newspaper or magazine ; and, like those in "Gil Blas," might happen

to a hundred other characters. He exhibits the ridiculous accidents and reverses to which human life is liable, not "the stuff" of which it is composed. He seldom probes to the quick, or penetrates beyond the surface; and, therefore, he leaves no stings in the minds of his readers, and in this respect is far less interesting than Fielding. His novels always enliven, and never tire us; we take them up with pleasure, and lay them down without any strong feeling of regret. We look on and laugh, as spectators of a highly amusing scene, without closing in with the combatants, or being made parties in the event. We read "*Roderick Random*" as an entertaining story, for the particular accidents and modes of life which it describes have ceased to exist; but we regard "*Tom Jones*" as a real history, because the author never stops short of those essential principles which lie at the bottom of all our actions, and in which we feel an immediate interest—*intus et in cute*. Smollett excels most as the lively caricaturist: Fielding as the exact painter and profound metaphysician. I am far from maintaining that this account applies uniformly to the productions of these two writers; but I think that, as far as they essentially differ, what I have stated is the general distinction between them. "*Roderick Random*" is the purest of Smollett's novels: I mean in point of style and description. Most of the incidents and characters are supposed to have been taken from the events of his own life; and are, therefore, truer to nature. There is a rude conception of generosity in some of his characters, of which Fielding seems to have been incapable, his amiable persons being merely good-natured. It is owing to this that *Strap* is superior to *Partridge*; as there is a heartiness and warmth of feeling in some of the scenes between Lieutenant *Bowling* and his nephew, which is beyond Fielding's power of impassioned writing. The whole of the scene on ship-board is a most admirable and striking picture, and, I imagine, very little if at all exaggerated, though the interest it excites is of a very unpleasant kind,

because the irritation and resistance to petty oppression can be of no avail. The picture of the little profligate French friar, who was Roderick's travelling companion, and of whom he always kept to the windward, is one of Smollett's most masterly sketches.—“Peregrine Pickle” is no great favourite of mine, and “Launcelot Greaves” was not worthy of the genius of the author.

“Humphry Clinker” and “Count Fathom” are both equally admirable in their way. Perhaps the former is the most pleasant gossiping novel that was ever written; that which gives the most pleasure with the least effort to the reader. It is quite as amusing as going the journey could have been; and we have just as good an idea of what happened on the road as if we had been of the party. Humphry Clinker himself is exquisite; and his sweetheart, Winifred Jenkins, not much behind him. Matthew Bramble, though not altogether original, is excellently supported, and seems to have been the prototype of Sir Anthony Absolute in the “Rivals.” But Lismahago is the flower of the flock. His tenaciousness in argument is not so delightful as the relaxation of his logical severity, when he finds his fortune mellowing in the wintry smiles of Mrs. Tabitha Bramble. This is the best preserved, and most severe of all Smollett's characters. The resemblance to “Don Quixote” is only just enough to make it interesting to the critical reader, without giving offence to anybody else. The indecency and filth in this novel, are what must be allowed to all Smollett's writings.—The subject and characters in “Count Fathom” are, in general, exceedingly disgusting: the story is also spun out to a degree of tediousness in the serious and sentimental parts; but there is more power of writing occasionally shown in it than in any of his works. I need only refer to the fine and bitter irony of the Count's address to the country of his ancestors on his landing in England; to the robber scene in the forest, which has never been surpassed; to the Parisian swindler who personates a raw English country squire (Western is

tame in the comparison); and to the story of the seduction in the west of England. It would be difficult to point out, in any author, passages written with more force and mastery than these.

It is not a very difficult undertaking to class Fielding or Smollett;—the one as an observer of the characters of human life, the other as a describer of its various eccentricities. But it is by no means so easy to dispose of Richardson, who was neither an observer of the one nor a describer of the other, but who seemed to spin his materials entirely out of his own brain, as if there had been nothing existing in the world beyond the little room in which he sat writing. There is an artificial reality about his works which is nowhere else to be met with. They have the romantic air of a pure fiction, with the literal minuteness of a common diary. The author had the strongest matter-of-fact imagination that ever existed, and wrote the oddest mixture of poetry and prose. He does not appear to have taken advantage of anything in actual nature from one end of his works to the other; and yet, throughout all his works, voluminous as they are (and this, to be sure, is one reason why they are so), he sets about describing every object and transaction, as if the whole had been given in on evidence by an eye-witness. This kind of high finishing from imagination is an anomaly in the history of human genius; and certainly nothing so fine was ever produced by the same accumulation of minute parts. There is not the least distraction, the least forgetfulness of the end—every circumstance is made to tell. I cannot agree that this exactness of detail produces heaviness; on the contrary, it gives an appearance of truth, and a positive interest to the story; and we listen with the same attention as we should to the particulars of a confidential communication. I at one time used to think some parts of “Sir Charles Grandison” rather trifling and tedious, especially the long description of Miss Harriet Byron’s wedding-clothes, till I was told of two young ladies who had severally copied out the

whole of that very description for their own private gratification. After that I could not blame the author.

The effect of reading this work is like an increase of kindred. You find yourself all of a sudden introduced into the midst of a large family, with aunts and cousins to the third and fourth generation, and grandmothers both by the father's and mother's side ; and a very odd set of people they are, but people whose real existence and personal identity you can no more dispute than your own senses, for you see and hear all that they do or say. What is still more extraordinary, all this extreme elaborateness in working out the story seems to have cost the author nothing ; for, it is said, that the published works are mere abridgments. I have heard (though this I suspect must be a pleasant exaggeration) that "Sir Charles Grandison" was originally written in eight-and-twenty volumes.

"Pamela" is the first of Richardson's productions, and the very child of his brain. Taking the general idea of the character of a modest and beautiful country girl, and of the ordinary situation in which she is placed, he makes out all the rest, even to the smallest circumstance, by the mere force of a reasoning imagination. It would seem as if a step lost, would be as fatal here as in a mathematical demonstration. The development of the character is the most simple, and comes the nearest to nature that it can do, without being the same thing. The interest of the story increases with the dawn of understanding and reflection in the heroine : her sentiments gradually expand themselves, like opening flowers. She writes better every time, and acquires a confidence in herself, just as a girl would do, in writing such letters in such circumstances ; and yet it is certain that no girl would write such letters in such circumstances. What I mean is this :—Richardson's nature is always the nature of sentiment and reflection, not of impulse or situation. He furnishes his characters, on every occasion, with the presence of mind of the author. He makes them act, not as they would from the impulse of the moment, but as they might

upon reflection, and upon a careful review of every motive and circumstance in their situation. They regularly sit down to write letters : and if the business of life consisted in letter-writing, and was carried on by the post (like a Spanish game at chess), human nature would be what Richardson represents it. All actual objects and feelings are blunted and deadened by being presented through a medium which may be true to reason, but is false in nature. He confounds his own point of view with that of the immediate actors in the scene ; and hence presents you with a conventional and factitious nature, instead of that which is real. Dr. Johnson seems to have preferred this truth of reflection to the truth of nature, when he said that there was more knowledge of the human heart in a page of Richardson, than in all Fielding. Fielding, however, saw more of the practical results, and understood the principles as well ; but he had not the same power of speculating upon their possible results, and combining them in certain ideal forms of passion and imagination, which was Richardson's real excellence.

It must be observed, however, that it is this mutual good understanding and comparing of notes between the author and the persons he describes, his infinite circumspection, his exact process of ratiocination and calculation, which gives such an appearance of coldness and formality to most of his characters,—which makes prudes of his women and coxcombs of his men. Everything is too conscious in his works. Everything is distinctly brought home to the mind of the actors in the scene, which is a fault undoubtedly : but then, it must be confessed, everything is brought home in its full force to the mind of the reader also ; and we feel the same interest in the story as if it were our own. Can anything be more beautiful or more affecting than Pamela's reproaches to her "lumpish heart," when she is sent away from her master's at her own request ; its lightness when she is sent for back ; the joy which the conviction of the sincerity of his love diffuses in her heart, like the coming on of spring ;

the artifice of the stuff gown ; the meeting with Lady Davers after her marriage ; and the trial-scene with her husband ? Who ever remained insensible to the passion of Lady Clementina, except Sir Charles Grandison himself, who was the object of it ? Clarissa is, however, his masterpiece, if we except Lovelace. If she is fine in herself, she is still finer in his account of her. With that foil, her purity is dazzling indeed : and she who could triumph by her virtue, and the force of her love, over the regality of Lovelace's mind, his wit, his person, his accomplishments, and his spirit, conquers all hearts. I should suppose that never sympathy more deep or sincere was excited than by the heroine of Richardson's romance, except by the calamities of real life. The links in this wonderful chain of interest are not more finely wrought, than their whole weight is overwhelming and irresistible. Who can forget the exquisite gradations of her long dying-scene, or the closing of the coffin-lid, when Miss Howe comes to take her last leave of her friend ; or the heart-breaking reflection that Clarissa makes on what was to have been her wedding-day ? Well does a certain writer exclaim—

" Books are a real world, both pure and good,  
Round which, with tendrils strong as flesh and blood,  
Our pastime and our happiness may grow ! "

Richardson's wit was unlike that of any other writer —his humour was so too. Both were the effect of intense activity of mind—laboured, and yet completely effectual. I might refer to Lovelace's reception and description of Hickman, when he calls out Death in his ear, as the name of the person with whom Clarissa had fallen in love ; and to the scene at the glove-shop. What can be more magnificent than his enumeration of his companions—" Belton, so pert and so pimply—Tourville, so fair and so foppish !" &c. In casuistry this author is quite at home ; and, with a boldness greater even than his puritanical severity, has exhausted every topic on virtue and vice. There is

another peculiarity in Richardson, not perhaps so uncommon, which is, his systematically preferring his most insipid characters to his finest, though both were equally his own invention, and he must be supposed to have understood something of their qualities. Thus he preferred the little, selfish, affected, insignificant Miss Byron, to the divine Clementina ; and again, Sir Charles Grandison to the nobler Lovelace. I have nothing to say in favour of Lovelace's morality ; but Sir Charles is the prince of coxcombs,—whose eye was never once taken from his own person and his own virtues ; and there is nothing which excites so little sympathy as this excessive egotism.

It remains to speak of Sterne ; and I shall do it in few words. There is more of mannerism and affectation in him, and a more immediate reference to preceding authors ; but his excellences, where he is excellent, are of the first order. His characters are intellectual and inventive, like Richardson's, but totally opposite in the execution. The one are made out by continuity, and patient repetition of touches ; the others, by glancing transitions and graceful apposition. His style is equally different from Richardson's : it is at times the most rapid, the most happy, the most idiomatic of any that is to be found. It is the pure essence of English conversational style. His works consist only of *morceaux* — of brilliant passages. I wonder that Goldsmith, who ought to have known better, should call him "a dull fellow." His wit is poignant, though artificial ; and his characters (though the groundwork of some of them had been laid before) have yet invaluable original differences ; and the spirit of the execution, the master-strokes constantly thrown into them, are not to be surpassed. It is sufficient to name them :—Yorick, Dr. Slop, Mr. Shandy, My Uncle Toby, Trim, Susanna, and the Widow Wadman. In these he has contrived to oppose, with equal felicity and originality, two characters, one of pure intellect, and the other of pure good nature, in *My Father* and *My Uncle Toby*.

There appears to have been in Sterne a vein of dry, sarcastic humour, and of extreme tenderness of feeling ; the latter sometimes carried to affectation, as in the tale of Maria, and the apostrophe to the recording angel ; but at other times pure, and without blemish. The story of Le Fevre is perhaps the finest in the English language. My Father's restlessness, both of body and mind, is inimitable. It is the model from which all those despicable performances against modern philosophy ought to have been copied, if their authors had known anything of the subject they were writing about. My Uncle Toby is one of the finest compliments ever paid to human nature. He is the most unoffending of God's creatures ; or, as the French express it, *un tel petit bon homme !* Of his bowling-green, his sieges, and his amours, who would say or think any thing amiss !

It is remarkable that our four best novel-writers belong nearly to the same age. We also owe to the same period (the reign of George II) the inimitable Hogarth, and some of our best writers of the middle style of comedy. If I were called upon to account for this coincidence, I should waive the consideration of more general causes, and ascribe it at once to the establishment of the Protestant ascendancy, and the succession of the House of Hanover. These great events appear to have given a more popular turn to our literature and genius, as well as to our government. It was found high time that the people should be represented in books as well as in Parliament. They wished to see some account of themselves in what they read ; and not to be confined always to the vices, the miseries, and frivolities of the great. Our domestic tragedy, and our earliest periodical works, appeared a little before the same period. In despotic countries, human nature is not of sufficient importance to be studied or described. The *canaille* are objects rather of disgust than curiosity ; and there are no middle classes. The works of Racine and Molière are either imitations of the verbiage of the Court, before which

they were represented, or fanciful caricatures of the manners of the lowest of the people. But in the period of our history in question, a security of person and property, and a freedom of opinion had been established, which made every man feel of some consequence to himself, and appear an object of some curiosity to his neighbours: our manners became more domesticated; there was a general spirit of sturdiness and independence, which made the English character more truly English than perhaps at any other period—that is, more tenacious of its own opinions and purposes. The whole surface of society appeared cut out into square enclosures and sharp angles, which extended to the dresses of the time, their gravel-walks and clipped hedges. Each individual had a certain ground-plot of his own to cultivate his particular humours in, and let them shoot out at pleasure; and a most plentiful crop they have produced accordingly. The reign of George II was, in a word, the age of *hobby-horses*: but, since that period, things have taken a different turn.

His present Majesty (God save the mark!) during almost the whole of his reign, has been constantly mounted on a great war-horse; and has fairly driven all competitors out of the field. Instead of minding our own affairs, or laughing at each other, the eyes of all his faithful subjects have been fixed on the career of the sovereign, and all hearts anxious for the safety of his person and government. Our pens and our swords have been alike drawn in their defence; and the returns of killed and wounded, the manufacture of newspapers and parliamentary speeches, have exceeded all former example. If we have had a little of the blessings of peace, we have had enough of the glories and calamities of war. His Majesty has indeed contrived to keep alive the greatest public interest ever known, by his determined manner of riding his hobby for half a century together, with the aristocracy, the democracy, the clergy, the landed and moneyed interest, and the rabble, in full cry after him;—and at the end of his career, most happily and unexpectedly succeeded,

amidst empires lost and won, kingdoms overturned and created, and the destruction of an incredible number of lives, in restoring the *divine right of kings*, and thus preventing any future abuse of the example which seated his family on the throne!

It is not to be wondered at, if amidst the tumults of events crowded into this period, our literature has partaken of the disorder of the time; if our prose has run mad, and our poetry grown childish. Among those persons who "have kept the even tenor of their way," the author of "*Evelina*," "*Cecilia*," and "*Camilla*," must be allowed to hold a distinguished place.<sup>1</sup> Mrs. Radcliffe's "enchantments drear," and mouldering castles, derived part of their interest, no doubt, from the supposed tottering state of all old structures at the time; and Mrs. Inchbald's "*Nature and Art*" would scarcely have had the same popularity, but that it fell in (as to its two main characters) with the prevailing prejudice of the moment, that judges and bishops were not invariably pure abstractions of justice and piety. Miss Edgeworth's "*Tales*," again (with the exception of "*Castle Rack-rent*," which is a genuine, unsophisticated, national portrait), are a kind of pedantic, pragmatical common sense, tinctured with the pertness and pretensions of the paradoxes to which they are so self-complacently opposed. Madame D'Arblay is, on the contrary, quite of the old school, a mere common observer of manners, and also a very woman. It is this last circumstance which forms the peculiarity of her writings, and distinguishes them from those masterpieces which I have before mentioned. She is a quick, lively, and accurate observer of persons and things; but she always looks at them with a consciousness of her sex, and in that point of view in which it is the particular business and interest of women to observe them. There is little in her works

<sup>1</sup> "*The Fool of Quality*," "*David Simple*," and "*Sydney Biddulph*," written about the middle of the last century, belong to the ancient *régime* of novel-writing. Of the "*Vicar of Wakefield*" I have attempted a character elsewhere.

of passion or character, or even manners, in the most extended sense of the word, as implying the sum-total of our habits and pursuits ; her *forte* is in describing the absurdities and affectations of external behaviour, or the manners of people in company. Her characters, which are ingenious caricatures, are, no doubt, distinctly marked, and well kept up ; but they are slightly shaded, and exceedingly uniform. Her heroes and heroines, almost all of them, depend on the stock of a single phrase or sentiment, and have certain mottoes or devices by which they may always be known. They form such characters as people might be supposed to assume for a night at a masquerade. She presents not the whole-length figure, nor even the face, but some prominent feature. In one of her novels, for example, a lady appears regularly every ten pages, to get a lesson in music for nothing. She never appears for any other purpose ; this is all you know of her ; and in this the whole wit and humour of the character consists. Meadows is the same, who has always the cue of being tired, without any other idea. It has been said of Shakespeare, that you may always assign his speeches to the proper characters ; and you may infallibly do the same thing with Madame D'Arblay's, for they always say the same thing. The Braughtons are the best. Mr. Smith is an exquisite city portrait. "Evelina" is also her best novel, because it is the shortest ; that is, it has all the liveliness in the sketches of character, and smartness of comic dialogue and repartee, without the tediousness of the story, and endless affectation of sentiment which disfigures the others.

Women, in general, have a quicker perception of any oddity or singularity of character than men, and are more alive to every absurdity which arises from a violation of the rules of society, or a deviation from established custom. This partly arises from the restraints on their own behaviour, which turn their attention constantly on the subject, and partly from other causes. The surface of their minds, like that

of their bodies, seems of a finer texture than ours ; more soft, and susceptible of immediate impulses. They have less muscular strength, less power of continued voluntary attention, of reason, passion, and imagination ; but they are more easily impressed with whatever appeals to their senses or habitual prejudices. The intuitive perception of their minds is less disturbed by any abstruse reasonings on causes or consequences. They learn the idiom of character and manners, as they acquire that of language, by rote, without troubling themselves about the principles. Their observation is not the less accurate on that account, as far as it goes, for it has been well said that "there is nothing so true as habit."

There is little other power in Madame D'Arblay's novels than that of immediate observation ; her characters, whether of refinement or vulgarity, are equally superficial and confined. The whole is a question of form, whether that form is adhered to or infringed upon. It is this circumstance which takes away dignity and interest from her story and sentiments, and makes the one so teasing and tedious, and the other so insipid. The difficulties in which she involves her heroines are too much "Female Difficulties" ; they are difficulties created out of nothing. The author appears to have no other idea of refinement than it is the reverse of vulgarity ; but the reverse of vulgarity is fastidiousness and affectation. There is a true and a false delicacy. Because a vulgar country Miss would answer "yes" to a proposal of marriage in the first page, Madame D'Arblay makes it a proof of an excess of refinement, and an indispensable point of etiquette in her young ladies to postpone the answer to the end of five volumes, without the smallest reason for their doing so, and with every reason to the contrary. The reader is led every moment to expect a *dénouement*, and is as often disappointed on some trifling pretext. The whole artifice of her fable consists in coming to no conclusion. Her ladies "stand so upon the order of their going," that they do not go at all. They will

not abate an ace of their punctilio in any circumstances or on any emergency. They would consider it as quite indecorous to run downstairs though the house were in flames, or to move an inch off the pavement though a scaffolding was falling. She has formed to herself an abstract idea of perfection in common behaviour, which is quite as romantic and impracticable as any other idea of the sort ; and the consequence has naturally been that she makes her heroines commit the greatest improprieties and absurdities in order to avoid the smallest. In opposition to a maxim in philosophy, they constantly act from the weakest motive, or rather from pure contradiction. The whole tissue of the fable is, in general, more wild and chimerical than anything in "*Don Quixote*," without the poetical truth or elevation. Madame D'Arblay has woven a web of difficulties for her heroines, something like the green silken threads in which the shepherdesses entangled the steed of Cervantes' hero, who swore, in his fine enthusiastic way, that he would sooner cut his passage to another world than disturb the least of those beautiful meshes. To mention the most painful instance—the "*Wanderer*," in her last novel, raises obstacles lighter than "*the gossamer that idles in the wanton summer air*," into insurmountable barriers ; and trifles with those that arise out of common sense, reason, and necessity. Her conduct is not to be accounted for directly out of the circumstances in which she is placed, but out of some factitious and misplaced refinement on them. It is a perpetual game at cross-purposes. There being a plain and strong motive why she should pursue any course of action, is a sufficient reason for her to avoid it, and the perversity of her conduct is in proportion to its levity—as the lightness of the feather baffles the force of the impulse that is given to it, and the slightest breath of air turns it back on the hand from which it is thrown. We can hardly consider this as the perfection of the female character !

I must say I like Mrs. Radcliffe's romances better,

and think of them oftener ; and even when I do not, part of the impression with which I survey the full-orbed moon shining in the blue expanse of heaven, or hear the wind sighing through autumnal leaves, or walk under the echoing archways of a Gothic ruin, is owing to a repeated perusal of the "Romance of the Forest," and the "Mysteries of Udolpho." Her descriptions of scenery, indeed, are vague and wordy to the last degree ; they are neither like Salvator nor Claude, nor nature nor art ; and she dwells on the effects of moonlight till we are sometimes weary of them ; her characters are insipid, the shadows of a shade, continued on, under different names, through all her novels ; her story comes to nothing. But in harrowing up the soul with imaginary horrors, and making the flesh creep, and the nerves thrill with fond hopes and fears, she is unrivalled among her fair country-women. Her great power lies in describing the indefinable, and embodying a phantom. She makes her readers twice children ; and from the dim and shadowy veil which she draws over the objects of her fancy, forces us to believe all that is strange, and next to impossible, of their mysterious agency ; whether it is the sound of the lover's lute borne o'er the distant waters along the winding shores of Provence, recalling with its magic breath, some long-lost friendship or some hopeless love ; or the full choir of the cloistered monks, chaunting their midnight orgies ; or the lonely voice of an unhappy sister in her pensive cell, like angels' whispered music ; or the deep sigh that steals from a dungeon on the startled ear ; or the dim apparition of ghastly features ; or the face of an assassin hid beneath a monk's cowl ; or the robber gliding through the twilight gloom of the forest. All the fascination that links the world of passion to the world unknown is hers, and she plays with it at her pleasure ; she has all the poetry of romance, all that is obscure, visionary, and objectless in the imagination. It seems that the simple notes of Clara's lute, which so delighted her youthful heart, still echo among the rocks and moun-

tains of the Valois ; the mellow tones of the minstrel's songs still mingle with the noise of the dashing oar and the rippling of the silver waves of the Mediterranean ; the voice of Agnes is heard from the haunted tower, and Schedoni's form still stalks through the frowning ruins of Palinzi. The greatest treat, however, which Mrs. Radcliffe's pen has provided for the lovers of the marvellous and terrible is the Provençal tale which Ludovico reads in the Castle of Udolpho as the lights are beginning to burn blue, and just before the faces appear from behind the tapestry that carry him off, and we hear no more of him. This tale is of a knight, who being engaged in a dance at some high festival of old romance, was summoned out by another knight clad in complete steel ; and being solemnly adjured to follow him into the mazes of the neighbouring wood, his conductor brought him at length to a hollow glade in the thickest part, where he pointed to the murdered corse of another knight, and lifting up his beaver showed him by the gleam of moonlight which fell on it, that it had the face of his spectre-guide ! The dramatic power in the character of Schedoni, the Italian monk, has been much admired and praised ; but the effect does not depend upon the character, but the situations ; not upon the figure, but upon the background. The "Castle of Otranto" (which is supposed to have led the way to this style of writing) is, to my notion, dry, meagre, and without effect. It is done upon false principles of taste. The great hand and arm which are thrust into the courtyard, and remain there all day long, are the pasteboard machinery of a pantomime ; they shock the senses, and have no purchase upon the imagination. They are a matter-of-fact impossibility ; a fixture, and no longer a phantom. *Quod sic mihi ostendis, incredulus odi.* By realizing the chimeras of ignorance and fear, begot upon shadows and dim likenesses, we take away the very grounds of credulity and superstition ; and, as in other cases, by facing out the imposture betray the secret to the contempt and laughter of the spectators.

The "Recess," and the "Old English Baron," are also "dismal treatises," but with little in them "at which our fell of hair is like to rouse and stir as life were in it." They are dull and prosing, without the spirit of fiction or the air of tradition to make them interesting. After Mrs. Radcliffe, Monk Lewis was the greatest master of the art of freezing the blood. The robbery-scene in the "Monk" is only inferior to that in "Count Fathom," and perfectly new in the circumstances and cast of the characters. Some of his descriptions are chargeable with unpardonable grossness, but the pieces of poetry interspersed in this far-famed novel, such as the fight of Roncesvalles and the Exile, in particular, have a romantic and delightful harmony, such as might be chaunted by the moonlight pilgrim, or might lull the dreaming mariner on summer seas.

If Mrs. Radcliffe touched the trembling chords of the imagination, making wild music there, Mrs. Inchbald has no less power over the springs of the heart. She not only moves the affections but melts us into "all the luxury of woe." Her "Nature and Art" is one of the most pathetic and interesting stories in the world. It is, indeed, too much so; or the distress is too naked, and the situations hardly to be borne with patience. I think nothing, however, can exceed in delicacy and beauty the account of the love-letter which the poor girl, who is the subject of the story, receives from her lover, and which she is a fortnight in spelling out, sooner than show it to any one else; nor the dreadful catastrophe of the last fatal scene, in which the same poor creature, as her former seducer, now become her judge, is about to pronounce sentence of death upon her, cries out in agony—"Oh, not from you!" The effect of this novel upon the feelings, is not only of the most distressing, but withering kind. It blights the sentiments, and haunts the memory. The "Simple Story" is not much better in this respect: the gloom, however, which hangs over it is of a more fixed and tender kind: we are not now lifted to ecstasy, only to be plunged in

madness ; and besides the sweetness and dignity of some of the characters, there are redeeming traits, retrospective glances on the course of human life, which brighten the backward stream, and smile in hope or patience to the last. Such is the account of Sandford, her stern and inflexible adviser, sitting by the bedside of Miss Milner, and comforting her in her dying moments ; thus softening the worst pang of human nature, and reconciling us to the best, but not most shining virtues in human character. The conclusion of "Nature and Art," on the contrary, is a scene of heartless desolation, which must effectually deter any one from ever reading the book twice. Mrs. Inchbald is an instance to confute the assertion of Rousseau, that women fail whenever they attempt to describe the passion of love.

I shall conclude this Lecture, by saying a few words of the author of "Caleb Williams," and the author of "Waverley." I shall speak of the last first. In knowledge, in variety, in facility, in truth of painting, in costume and scenery, in freshness of subject, and in untired interest, in glancing lights and the graces of a style passing at will "from grave to gay, from lively to severe," at once romantic and familiar, having the utmost force of imitation and apparent freedom of invention ; these novels have the highest claims to admiration. What lack they yet ? The author has all power given him from without—he has not, perhaps, an equal power from within. The intensity of the feeling is not equal to the distinctness of the imagery. He sits like a magician in his cell, and conjures up all shapes and sights to the view ; and with a little variation we might apply to him what Spenser says of Fancy :—

" His chamber was dispainted all within  
 With sundry colours, in the which were writ  
 Infinite shapes of things dispersed thin ;  
 Some such as in the world were never yet ;  
 Some daily seene and knownen by their names,  
 Such as in idle fantasies do fit ;  
 Infernal hags, centaurs, fiends, hippodames,  
 Apes, lions, eagles, owls, fools, lovers, children, dames."

In the midst of all this phantasmagoria, the author himself never appears to take part with his characters, to prompt our affection to the good, or sharpen our antipathy to the bad. It is the perfection of art to conceal art ; and this is here done so completely, that while it adds to our pleasure in the work, it seems to take away from the merit of the author. As he does not thrust himself forward in the foreground, he loses the credit of the performance. The copies are so true to nature, that they appear like tapestry figures taken off by the pattern ; the obvious patchwork of tradition and history. His characters are transplanted at once from their native soil to the page which we are reading, without any traces of their having passed through the hot-bed of the author's genius or vanity. He leaves them as he found them ; but this is doing wonders. The Laird and the Bailie of Bradwardine, the idiot rhymer, David Gellatley, Miss Rose Bradwardine, and Miss Flora Mac-Ivor, her brother the Highland Jacobite chieftain, Vich Ian Vohr, the Highland rover, Donald Bean Lean, and the worthy page Callum Beg, Bothwell and Balfour of Burley, Claverhouse and Macbriar, Elshie the Black Dwarf, and the Red Reever of Westburn Flat, Hobbie and Grace Armstrong, Ellangowan and Dominie Sampson, Dirk Hatteraick and Meg Merrilies, are at present "familiar in our mouths as household names," and whether they are actual persons or creations of the poet's pen, is an impertinent inquiry. The picturesque and local scenery is as fresh as the lichen on the rock : the characters are a part of the scenery. If they are put in action, it is a moving picture : if they speak, we hear their dialect and the tones of their voice. If the humour is made out by dialect, the character by the dress, the interest by the facts and documents in the author's possession, we have no right to complain, if it is made out ; but sometimes it hardly is, and then we have a right to say so. For instance, in the "Tales of my Landlord," Canny Elshie is not in himself so formidable or petrific a person as the real

Black Dwarf, called David Ritchie, nor are his acts or sayings so staggering to the imagination. Again, the first introduction of this extraordinary personage, groping about among the hoary twilight ruins of the Witch of Micklestane Moor and her Grey Geese, is as full of preternatural power and bewildering effect (according to the tradition of the country) as can be ; while the last decisive scene, where the Dwarf, in his resumed character of Sir Edward Mauley, comes from the tomb in the Chapel, to prevent the forced marriage of the daughter of his former betrothed mistress with the man she abhors, is altogether powerless and tame. No situation could be imagined more finely calculated to call forth an author's powers of imagination and passion ; but nothing is done. The assembly is dispersed under circumstances of the strongest natural feeling, and the most appalling preternatural appearances, just as if the effect had been produced by a peace-officer entering for the same purpose. These instances of a falling-off are, however, rare ; and if this author should not be supposed by fastidious critics to have original genius in the highest degree, he has other qualities which supply its place so well, his materials are so rich and varied, and he uses them so lavishly, that the reader is no loser by the exchange. We are not in fear that he should publish another novel ; we are under no apprehension of his exhausting himself, for he has shown that he is inexhaustible.

Whoever else is, it is pretty clear that the author of "*Caleb Williams*" and "*St. Leon*" is not the author of "*Waverley*." Nothing can be more distinct or excellent in their several ways than these two writers. If the one owes almost everything to external observation and traditional character, the other owes everything to internal conception and contemplation of the possible workings of the human mind. There is little knowledge of the world, little variety, neither an eye for the picturesque, nor a talent for the humorous in "*Caleb Williams*" for instance, but you cannot doubt for a moment of the originality of the work and the force of

the conception. The impression made upon the reader is the exact measure of the strength of the author's genius. For the effect, both in "Caleb Williams" and "St. Leon," is entirely made out, neither by facts, nor dates, by black-letter or magazine learning, by transcript or record, but by intense and patient study of the human heart, and by an imagination projecting itself into certain situations, and capable of working up its imaginary feelings to the height of reality. The author launches into the ideal world, and must sustain himself and the reader there by the mere force of imagination. The sense of power in the writer thus adds to the interest of the subject.—The character of Falkland is a sort of apotheosis of the love of fame. The gay, the gallant Falkland lives only in the good opinion of good men; for this he adorns his soul with virtue, and tarnishes it with crime; he lives only for this, and dies as he loses it. He is a lover of virtue but a worshipper of fame. Stung to madness by a brutal insult, he avenges himself by a crime of the deepest dye, and the remorse of his conscience and the stain upon his honour prey upon his peace and reason ever after. It was into the mouth of such a character that a modern poet has well put the words,

" — Action is momentary,  
The motion of a muscle, this way or that;  
Suffering is long, obscure, and infinite."

In the conflict of his feelings he is worn to a skeleton, wasted to a shadow. But he endures this living death to watch over his undying reputation, and to preserve his name unsullied and free from suspicion. But he is at last disappointed in this his darling object, by the very means he takes to secure it, and by harassing and goading Caleb Williams (whose insatiable, incessant curiosity had wormed itself into his confidence) to a state of desperation, by employing every sort of persecution, and by trying to hunt him from society like an infection, makes him turn upon him, and betray the inmost secret of his soul. The last moments of Falkland

are indeed sublime : the spark of life and the hope of imperishable renown are extinguished in him together ; and bending his last look of forgiveness on his victim and destroyer, he dies a martyr to fame, but a confessor at the shrine of virtue ! The re-action and play of these two characters into each other's hands (like Othello and Iago) is inimitably well managed, and on a par with anything in the dramatic art ; but Falkland is the hero of the story, Caleb Williams is only the instrument of it. This novel is utterly unlike anything else that ever was written, and is one of the most original as well as powerful productions in the English language. "St. Leon" is not equal to it in the plot and groundwork, though perhaps superior in the execution. In the one Mr. Godwin has hit upon the extreme point of the perfectly natural and perfectly new ; in the other he enters into the preternatural world, and comes nearer to the world of commonplace. Still the character is of the same exalted intellectual kind. As the ruling passion of the one was the love of fame, so in the other the sole business of life is thought. Raised by the fatal discovery of the philosopher's stone above mortality, he is cut off from all participation with its pleasures. He is a limb torn from society. In possession of eternal youth and beauty, he can feel no love ; surrounded, tantalized, tormented with riches, he can do no good. The races of men pass before him as in a *speculum* ; but he is attached to them by no common tie of sympathy or suffering. He is thrown back into himself and his own thoughts. He lives in the solitude of his own breast,—without wife or child, or friend, or enemy in the world. His is the solitude of the soul,—not of woods, or seas, or mountains,—but the desert of society, the waste and desolation of the heart. He is himself alone. His existence is purely contemplative, and is therefore intolerable to one who has felt the rapture of affection or the anguish of woe. The contrast between the enthusiastic eagerness of human pursuits and their blank disappointment, was never, perhaps, more finely portrayed than in this novel. Marguerite, the wife

of St. Leon, is an instance of pure and disinterested affection in one of the noblest of her sex. It is not improbable that the author found the model of this character in nature.—Of "Mandeville," I shall say only one word. It appears to me to be a falling-off in the subject, not in the ability. The style and declamation are even more powerful than ever. But unless an author surpasses himself, and surprises the public as much the fourth or fifth time as he did the first, he is said to fall off, because there is not the same stimulus of novelty. A great deal is here made out of nothing, or out of a very disagreeable subject. I cannot agree that the story is out of nature. The feeling is very common indeed; though carried to an unusual and improbable excess, or to one with which from the individuality and minuteness of the circumstances, we cannot readily sympathize.

It is rare that a philosopher is a writer of romances. The union of the two characters in this author is a sort of phenomenon in the history of letters; for I cannot but consider the author of "Political Justice" as a philosophical reasoner of no ordinary stamp or pretensions. That work, whatever its defects may be, is distinguished by the most acute and severe logic, and by the utmost boldness of thinking, founded on a love and conviction of truth. It is a system of ethics, and one that, though I think it erroneous myself, is built on following up into its fair consequences, a very common and acknowledged principle, that abstract reason and general utility are the only test and standard of moral rectitude. If this principle is true, then the system is true: but I think that Mr. Godwin's book has done more than anything else to overturn the sufficiency of this principle by abstracting, in a strict metaphysical process, the influence of reason or the understanding in moral questions and relations from that of habit, sense, association, local and personal attachment, natural affection, &c.; and by thus making it appear how necessary the latter are to our limited, imperfect, and mixed being, how impossible the former

as an exclusive guide of action, unless man were, or were capable of becoming, a purely intellectual being. Reason is no doubt one faculty of the human mind, and the chief gift of Providence to man ; but it must itself be subject to and modified by other instincts and principles, because it is not the only one. This work then, even supposing it to be false, is invaluable, as demonstrating an important truth by the *reductio ad absurdum* ; or it is an *experimentum crucis* in one of the grand and trying questions of moral philosophy.—In delineating the character and feelings of the hermetic philosopher St. Leon, perhaps the author had not far to go from those of a speculative philosophical Recluse. He who deals in the secrets of magic, or in the secrets of the human mind, is too often looked upon with jealous eyes by the world, which is no great conjurer ; he who pours out his intellectual wealth into the lap of the public, is hated by those who cannot understand how he came by it ; he who thinks beyond his age, cannot expect the feelings of his contemporaries to go along with him ; he whose mind is of no age or country, is seldom properly recognized during his lifetime, and must wait, in order to have justice done him, for the late but lasting award of posterity :—“Where his treasure is, there his heart is also.”

## LECTURE VII

### ON THE WORKS OF HOGARTH: ON THE GRAND AND FAMILIAR STYLE OF PAINTING

If the quantity of amusement, or of matter for more serious reflection which their works have afforded, is that by which we are to judge of precedence among the intellectual benefactors of mankind, there are, perhaps, few persons who can put in a stronger claim to our gratitude than Hogarth. It is not hazarding too much to assert, that he was one of the greatest comic geniuses that ever lived, and he was certainly one of the most extraordinary men this country has produced. Criticism has not done him justice, though public opinion has. His works have received a sanction which it would be vain to dispute, in the universal delight and admiration with which they have been regarded, from their first appearance to the present moment. The wonderful knowledge which he possessed of human life and manners, is only to be surpassed (if it can be) by the power of invention with which he has combined and contrasted his materials in the most ludicrous and varied points of view, and by the mastery of execution with which he has embodied and made tangible the very thoughts and passing movements of the mind. Critics sometimes object to the style of Hogarth's pictures, or to the class to which they belong. First, he belongs to no class, or if he does, it is to the same classes as Fielding, Smollett, Vanbrugh, and Molière. Besides, the merit of his pictures does not depend on the nature of the subject, but on the knowledge displayed of it, on the number of ideas they excite, on the fund of thought and observation contained in them. They are to be studied as works

of science as well as of amusement ; they satisfy our love of truth ; they fill up the void in the mind ; they form a series of plates in natural history, and of that most interesting part of natural history, the history of our own species. Make what deductions you please for the vulgarity of the subject, yet in the research, the profundity, the absolute truth and precision of the delineation of character ; in the invention of incident, in wit and humour ; in the life with which they are "instinct in every part" ; in everlasting variety and originality ; they never have, and probably never will be surpassed. They stimulate the faculties as well as soothe them. "Other pictures we see, Hogarth's we read."

The public had not long ago an opportunity of viewing most of Hogarth's pictures, in the collection made of them at the British Gallery. The superiority of the original paintings to the common prints, is in a great measure confined to the "*Marriage à la Mode*," with which I shall begin my remarks.

Boccaccio, the most refined and sentimental of all the novel-writers, has been stigmatized as a mere inventor of licentious tales, because readers in general have only seized on those things in his works which were suited to their own taste, and have thus reflected their own grossness back upon the writer. So it has happened, that the majority of critics having been most struck with the strong and decided expression in Hogarth, the extreme delicacy and subtle gradations of character in his pictures have almost entirely escaped them. In the first picture of the "*Marriage à la Mode*," the three figures of the young nobleman, his intended bride, and her inamorato, the lawyer, show how much Hogarth excelled in the power of giving soft and effeminate expression. They have, however, been less noticed than the other figures, which tell a plainer story, and convey a more palpable moral. Nothing can be more finely managed than the difference of character in these delicate personages. The beau sits smiling at the looking-glass, with a reflected

simper of self-admiration, and a languishing inclination of the head, while the rest of his body is perked up on his high heels, with a certain air of tip-toe elevation. He is the Narcissus of the reign of George II, whose powdered periuke, ruffles, gold lace, and patches, divide his self-love equally with his own person, the true Sir Plume of his day,—

“— Of amber snuff-box justly vain,  
And the nice conduct of a clouded cane.”

There is the same felicity in the figure and attitude of the bride, courted by the lawyer. There is the utmost flexibility, and yielding softness in her whole person, a listless languor and tremulous suspense in the expression of her face. It is the precise look and air which Pope has given to his favourite Belinda, just at the moment of the “Rape of the Lock.” The heightened glow, the forward intelligence, and loosened soul of love in the same face, in the “Assignation Scene” before the masquerade, form a fine and instructive contrast to the delicacy, timidity, and coy reluctance expressed in the first. The lawyer, in both pictures, is much the same—perhaps too much so—though even this unmoved, unaltered appearance may be designed as characteristic. In both cases, he has “a person and a smooth dispose, framed to make women false.” He is full of that easy good humour, and easy good opinion of himself, with which the sex are delighted. There is not a sharp angle in his face to obstruct his success, or give a hint of doubt or difficulty. His whole aspect is round and rosy, lively and unmeaning, happy without the least expense of thought, careless, and inviting; and conveys a perfect idea of the uninterrupted glide and pleasing murmur of the soft periods that flow from his tongue.

The expression of the bride in the “Morning Scene” is the most highly seasoned, and at the same time the most vulgar in the series. The figure, face, and attitude of the husband are inimitable. Hogarth has with great skill contrasted the pale countenance of the

husband with the yellow whitish colour of the marble chimney-piece behind him, in such a manner as to preserve the fleshy tone of the former. The airy splendour of the view of the inner room in this picture, is probably not exceeded by any of the productions of the Flemish school.

The Young Girl, in the third picture, who is represented as a victim of fashionable profligacy, is unquestionably one of the artist's *chefs-d'œuvre*. The exquisite delicacy of the painting is only surpassed by the felicity and subtlety of the conception. Nothing can be more striking than the contrast between the extreme softness of her person and the hardened indifference of her character. The vacant stillness, the docility to vice, the premature suppression of youthful sensibility, the doll-like mechanism of the whole figure, which seems to have no other feeling but a sickly sense of pain,—show the deepest insight into human nature, and into the effects of those refinements in depravity, by which it has been good-naturedly asserted, that "vice loses half its evil in losing all its grossness." The story of this picture is in some parts very obscure and enigmatical. It is certain that the Nobleman is not looking straight forward to the Quack, whom he seems to have been threatening with his cane; but that his eyes are turned up with an ironical leer of triumph to the Procureess. The commanding attitude and size of this woman,—the swelling circumference of her dress, spread out like a turkey-cock's feathers,—the fierce, ungovernable, inveterate malignity of her countenance, which hardly needs the comment of the clasp-knife to explain her purpose, are all admirable in themselves, and still more so, as they are opposed to the mute insensibility, the elegant negligence of dress, and the childish figure of the girl, who is supposed to be her *protégée*. As for the Quack, there can be no doubt entertained about him. His face seems as if it were composed of salve, and his features exhibit all the chaos and confusion of the most gross, ignorant, and impudent empiricism.

The gradations of ridiculous affectation in the "Music Scene," are finely imagined and preserved. The preposterous, overstrained admiration of the Lady of Quality ; the sentimental, insipid, patient delight of the Man with his hair in papers, and sipping his tea ; the pert, smirking, conceited, half-distorted approbation of the figure next to him ; the transition to the total insensibility of the round face in profile, and then to the wonder of the Negro-boy at the rapture of his mistress,—form a perfect whole. The sanguine complexion and flame-coloured hair of the female Virtuoso throw an additional light on the character. This is lost in the print. The continuing the red colour of the hair into the back of the chair, has been pointed out as one of those instances of alliteration in colouring, of which these pictures are everywhere full. The gross, bloated appearance of the Italian Singer is well relieved by the hard features of the instrumental Performer behind him, which might be carved of wood. The Negro-boy, holding the chocolate, in expression, colour, and execution, is a masterpiece. The gay, lively derision of the other Negro-boy, playing with the Actæon, is an ingenious contrast to the profound amazement of the first. Some account has already been given of the two lovers in this picture. It is curious to observe the infinite activity of mind which the artist displays on every occasion. An instance occurs in the present picture. He has so contrived the papers in the hair of the Bride, as to make them look almost like a wreath of half-blown flowers ; while those which he has placed on the head of the musical Amateur very much resemble a *chevaux-de-frise* of horns, which adorn and fortify the lack-lustre expression and mild resignation of the face beneath.

The "Night Scene" is inferior to the rest of the series. The attitude of the Husband, who is just killed, is one in which it would be impossible for him to stand, or even to fall. It resembles the loose pasteboard figures they make for children. The characters in the last picture, in which the wife dies, are all

masterly. We would particularly refer to the captious, petulant self-sufficiency of the Apothecary, whose face and figure are constructed on exact physiognomical principles, and to the fine example of passive obedience, and non-resistance in the Servant, whom he is taking to task, and whose coat of green and yellow livery is as long and melancholy as his face. The disconsolate look, the haggard eyes, the open mouth, the comb sticking in the hair, the broken, gapped teeth, which, as it were, hitch in an answer—everything about him denotes the utmost perplexity and dismay. The harmony and gradations of colour in this picture are uniformly preserved with the greatest nicety, and are well worthy the attention of the artist.

We have so far attempted to point out the fund of observation, physical and moral, contained in one set of these pictures, the "*Marriage à la Mode*." The rest would furnish as many topics to descant upon, were the patience of the reader as inexhaustible as the painter's invention. But as this is not the case, we shall content ourselves with barely referring to some of those figures in the other pictures, which appear the most striking ; and which we see, not only while we are looking at them, but which we have before us at all other times. For instance : who, having seen, can easily forget that exquisite frost-piece of religion and morality, the antiquated prude, in the picture of "*Morning*" ? or that striking commentary on the "good old times," the little wretched appendage of a footboy, who crawls, half-famished and half-frozen, behind her ? The French man and woman, in the "*Noon*," are the perfection of flighty affectation and studied grimace ; the amiable fraternization of the two old women saluting each other, is not enough to be admired ; and in the little master, in the same national group, we see the early promise and personification of that eternal principle of wondrous self-complacency proof against all circumstances, which makes the French the only people who are vain, even of being cuckolded and being conquered ! Or shall we prefer to this, the

outrageous distress and unmitigated terrors of the boy who has dropped his dish of meat, and who seems red all over with shame and vexation, and bursting with the noise he makes? Or what can be better than the good housewifery of the girl underneath, who is devouring the lucky fragments? Or than the plump, ripe, florid, luscious look of the servant-wench, embraced by a greasy rascal of an Othello, with her pie-dish tottering like her virtue, and with the most precious part of its contents running over? Just—no, not quite—as good, is the joke of the woman overhead, who, having quarrelled with her husband, is throwing their Sunday's dinner out of the window, to complete this chapter of accidents of baked dishes. The husband, in the "Evening Scene," is certainly as meek as any recorded in history; but we cannot say that we admire this picture, or the "Night Scene" after it. But then, in the "Taste in High Life," there is that inimitable pair, differing only in sex, congratulating and delighting one another by "all the mutually reflected charities" of folly and affectation; with the young lady, coloured like a rose, dandling her little, black, pug-faced, white-teethed, chuckling favourite; and with the portrait of M. Des Noyers, in the background, dancing in a grand ballet, surrounded by butterflies. And again, in "The Election Dinner," is the immortal cobbler, surrounded by his peers, who, "frequent and full,"—

"In loud recess and brawling conclave sit!"

the Jew, in the second picture, a very Jew in grain—innumerable fine sketches of heads in the "Polling for Votes," of which the nobleman, overlooking the caricaturist, is the best;—and then the irresistible, tumultuous display of broad humour in the "Chairing the Member," which is, perhaps, of all Hogarth's pictures, the most full of laughable incidents and situations. The yellow, rusty-faced thresher, with his swinging flail, breaking the head of one of the chairmen; and his redoubted antagonist, the sailor, with his oak stick, and stumping wooden leg, a supplemental

cudgel—the persevering ecstasy of the hobbling blind fiddler, who, in the fray, appears to have been trod upon by the artificial excrescence of the honest tar—Monsieur, the monkey, with piteous aspect, speculating the impending disaster of the triumphant candidate; and his brother Bruin, appropriating the paunch—the precipitous flight of the pigs, souse over head into the water; the fine lady fainting, with vermillion lips; and the two chimney-sweepers, satirical young rogues!—I had almost forgot the politician, who is burning a hole through his hat with a candle in reading a newspaper; and the chickens, in the “March to Finchley.” wandering in search of their lost dam, who is found in the pocket of the Serjeant. Of the pictures in the “Rake’s Progress,” exhibited in this collection, I shall not here say anything, because I think them, on the whole, inferior to the prints, and because they have already been criticized by a writer, to whom I could add nothing, in a paper which ought to be read by every lover of Hogarth and of English genius—I mean, Mr. Lamb’s “Essay on the Works of Hogarth.” I shall at present proceed to form some estimate of the style of art in which this painter excelled.

What distinguishes his compositions from all others of the same general kind, is, that they are equally remote from caricature and from mere still life. It of course happens in subjects taken from common life, that the painter can procure real models, and he can get them to sit as long as he pleases. Hence, in general, those attitudes and expressions have been chosen which could be assumed the longest; and in imitating which, the artist, by taking pains and time, might produce almost as complete *faux-similes* as he could of a flower or a flower-pot, of a damask curtain or a china vase. The copy was as perfect and as uninteresting in the one case as in the other. On the contrary, subjects of drollery and ridicule, affording frequent examples of strange deformity and peculiarity of features, these have been eagerly seized by another class of artists, who, without subjecting them-

selves to the laborious drudgery of the Dutch school and their imitators, have produced our popular caricatures, by rudely copying or exaggerating the casual irregularities of the human countenance. Hogarth has equally avoided the faults of both these styles; the insipid tameness of the one, and the gross extravagance of the other, so as to give to the productions of his pencil equal solidity and effect. For his faces go to the very verge of caricature, and yet never (I believe in any single instance) go beyond it: they take the very widest latitude, and yet we always see the links which bind them to nature: they bear all the marks, and carry all the conviction of reality with them, as if we had seen the actual faces for the first time, from the precision, consistency, and good sense with which the whole and every part is made out. They exhibit the most uncommon features, with the most uncommon expressions; but which yet are as familiar and intelligible as possible, because, with all the boldness, they have all the truth of nature. Hogarth has left behind him as many of these memorable faces, in their memorable moments, as, perhaps, most of us remember in the course of our lives, and has thus doubled the quantity of our experience.

It will assist us in forming a more determinate idea of the peculiar genius of Hogarth, to compare him with a deservedly admired artist in our own times. The highest authority on art in this country, I understand, has pronounced that Mr. Wilkie united the excellences of Hogarth to those of Teniers. I demur to this decision in both its branches: but in demurring to authority it is necessary to give our reasons. I conceive that this ingenious and attentive observer of nature has certain essential, real, and indisputable excellences of his own; and I think it, therefore, the less important to clothe him with any vicarious merits which do not belong to him. Mr. Wilkie's pictures, generally speaking, derive almost their whole value from their reality, or the truth of the representation.

They are works of pure imitative art; and the test of this style of composition is to represent nature faithfully and happily in its simplest combinations. It may be said of an artist like Mr. Wilkie, that nothing human is indifferent to him. His mind takes an interest in, and it gives an interest to, the most familiar scenes and transactions of life. He professedly gives character, thought, and passion, in their lowest degrees, and in their everyday forms. He selects the commonest events and appearances of nature for his subjects; and trusts to their very commonness for the interest and amusement he is to excite. Mr. Wilkie is a serious, prosaic, literal narrator of facts; and his pictures may be considered as diaries, or minutes of what is passing constantly about us. Hogarth, on the contrary, is essentially a comic painter; his pictures are not indifferent, unimpassioned, transcripts of incidental scenes or customs, or descriptions of human nature, but rich, exuberant moral satires, exposing vice and folly in their most ludicrous points of view, and, with a profound insight into the weak sides of character and manners in all their tendencies, combinations, and contrasts. There is not a single picture of his containing a representation of merely natural or domestic scenery. He is carried away by a passion for the *ridiculous*. His object is not so much "to hold the mirror up to nature" as "to show vice her own feature, scorn her own image." He is so far from contenting himself with still-life that he is always on the verge of caricature, though without ever falling into it. He does not represent folly or vice in its incipient, or dormant, or *grub* state; but full-grown, with wings, pampered into all sorts of affectation, airy, ostentatious, and extravagant. Folly is there seen at the height—the moon is at the full; it is "the very error of the time." There is a perpetual collision of eccentricities—a tilt and tournament of absurdities; the prejudices and caprices of mankind are let loose, and set together by the ears, as in a bear-garden.

Hogarth paints nothing but comedy or tragico-comedy. Wilkie paints neither one nor the other. Hogarth never looks at any object but to find out a moral or a ludicrous effect. Wilkie never looks at any object but to see that it is there. Hogarth's pictures are a perfect jest-book from one end to the other. I do not remember a single joke in Wilkie's, except one very bad one of the boy in the "Blind Fiddler," scraping the gridiron, or fire-shovel, I forget which it is.<sup>1</sup> In looking at Hogarth, you are ready to burst your sides with laughing at the unaccountable jumble of odd things which are brought together; you look at Wilkie's pictures with a mingled feeling of curiosity and admiration at the accuracy of the representation. For instance, there is a most admirable head of a man coughing in the "Rent-day"; the action, the keeping, the choked sensation, are inimitable; but there is nothing to laugh at in a man coughing. What strikes the mind is the difficulty of a man's being painted coughing, which here certainly is a masterpiece of art. But turn to the blackguard cobbler in the "Election Dinner," who has been smutting his neighbour's face over, and who is lolling out his tongue at the joke, with a most surprising obliquity of vision, and immediately "your lungs begin to crow like chanticleer." Again, there is the little boy crying in the "Cut Finger," who only gives you the idea of a cross, disagreeable, obstinate child in pain; whereas the same face in Hogarth's "Noon," from the ridiculous perplexity it is in, and its extravagant, noisy, unfelt distress, at the accident of having let fall the pie-dish, is quite irresistible. Mr. Wilkie, in his picture of the "Ale-house Door," I believe, painted Mr. Liston as one of the figures without any great effect. Hogarth would have given any price for such a subject, and would have made it worth any money. I have never seen anything in the expression of comic humour equal to Hogarth's pictures but Liston's face!

<sup>1</sup> The waiter drawing the cork, in the "Rent-day," is another exception, and quite Hogarthian.

Mr. Wilkie paints interiors, but still you generally connect them with the country. Hogarth, even when he paints people in the open air, represents them either as coming from London, as in the polling for votes at Brentford, or as returning to it, as the dyer and his wife at Bagnigge Wells. In this last picture he has contrived to convert a common rural image into a type and emblem of city honours. In fact, I know no one who had a less pastoral imagination than Hogarth. He delights in the thick of St. Giles's or St. James's. His pictures breathe a certain close, greasy, tavern air. The fare he serves up to us consists of high-seasoned dishes, ragouts, and olla podridas, like the supper in "*Gil Blas*," which it requires a strong stomach to digest. Mr. Wilkie presents us with a sort of lenten fare, very good and wholesome, but rather insipid than overpowering! Mr. Wilkie's pictures are, in general, much better painted than Hogarth's; but the "*Marriage à la Mode*" is superior both in colour and execution to any of Wilkie's. I may add here, without any disparagement, that, as an artist, Mr. Wilkie is hardly to be mentioned with Teniers. Neither in truth and brilliant clearness of colouring, nor in facility of execution, is there any comparison. Teniers was a perfect master in all these respects, and our own countryman is positively defective, notwithstanding the very laudable care with which he finishes every part of his pictures. There is an evident smear and dragging of the paint, which is also of a bad purple or puttyish tone, and which never appears in the pictures of the Flemish artist, any more than in a looking-glass. Teniers, probably from his facility of execution, succeeded in giving a more local and momentary expression to his figures. They seem each going on with his particular amusement or occupation; Wilkie's have, in general, more a look of sitting for their pictures. Their compositions are very different also; and in this respect, I believe, Mr. Wilkie has the advantage. Teniers's boors are usually amusing themselves at skittles, or

dancing, or drinking, or smoking, or doing what they like, in a careless, desultory way ; and so the composition is loose and irregular. Wilkie's figures are all drawn up in a regular order, and engaged in one principal action, with occasional episodes. The story of the "Blind Fiddler" is the most interesting and the best told. The two children standing before the musician are delightful. The "Card-players" is the best coloured of his pictures, if I am not mistaken. The "Village Politicians," though excellent as to character and composition, is inferior as a picture to those which Mr. Wilkie has since painted. His latest pictures, however, do not appear to me to be his best. There is something of manner and affectation in the grouping of the figures, and a pink and rosy colour spread over them, which is out of place. The hues of Rubens and Sir Joshua do not agree with Mr. Wilkie's subjects. One of his last pictures, that of "Duncan Gray," is equally remarkable for sweetness and simplicity in colour, composition, and expression. I must here conclude this very general account ; for to point out the particular beauties of every one of his pictures in detail, would require an Essay by itself.

I have promised to say something in this Lecture on the difference between the grand and familiar style of painting ; and I shall throw out what imperfect hints I have been able to collect on this subject, so often attempted and never yet succeeded in, taking the examples and illustrations from Hogarth, that is, from what he possessed or wanted in each kind.

And first, the difference is not that between imitation and invention ; for there is as much of this last quality in Hogarth as in any painter or poet whatever. As for example, to take two of his pictures only, I mean the "Enraged Musician" and the "Gin Lane" ; in one of which every conceivable variety of disagreeable and discordant sound—the razor-grinder turning his wheel ; the boy with his drum, and the girl with her rattle momentarily suspended ; the pursuing blowing his horn ; the shrill milk-woman ; the inexorable

ballad-singer, with her squalling infant; the pewterer's shop close by; the fish-women; the chimney-sweepers at the top of a chimney, and the two cats in melodious concert on the ridge of the tiles; with the bells ringing in the distance, as we see by the flags flying;—and in the other, the complicated forms and signs of death and ruinous decay—the woman on the stairs of the bridge asleep, letting her child fall over; her ghastly companion opposite, next to death's door, with hollow, famished cheeks and staring ribs; the dog fighting with the man for the bare shin-bone; the man hanging himself in a garret; the female corpse put into a coffin by the parish beadle; the men marching after a funeral, seen through a broken wall in the background; and the very houses reeling as if drunk and tumbling about the ears of the infatuated victims below, the pawn-broker's being the only one that stands firm and unimpaired—enforce the moral meant to be conveyed by each of these pieces with a richness and research of combination and artful contrast not easily paralleled in any production of the pencil or the pen. The clock pointing to four in the morning, in "Modern Midnight Conversation," just as the immovable Parson Ford is filling out another glass from a brimming punch-bowl, while most of his companions, with the exception of the sly lawyer, are falling around him "like leaves in October"; and again, the extraordinary mistake of the man leaning against the post, in the "Lord Mayor's Procession"—show a mind capable of seizing the most rare and transient coincidences of things, of imagining what either never happened at all, or of instantly fixing on and applying to its purpose what never happened but once. So far, the invention shown in the great style of painting is poor in the comparison. Indeed, grandeur is supposed (whether rightly or not, I shall not here inquire) to imply a simplicity inconsistent with this inexhaustible variety of incident and circumstantial detail.

Secondly, the difference between the ideal and

familiar style is not to be explained by the difference between the genteel and vulgar ; for it is evident that Hogarth was almost as much at home in the genteel comedy as in the broad farce of his pictures. He excelled not only in exhibiting the coarse humours and disgusting incidents of the lowest life, but in exhibiting the vices, the follies, and the frivolity of the fashionable manners of his time : his fine ladies do not yield the palm of ridicule to his waiting-maids, and his lords and his footmen are on a very respectable footing of equality. There is no want, for example, in the "Marriage à la Mode," or in "Taste in High Life," of affectation verging into idiocy, or of languid sensibility that might—

"Die of a rose in aromatic pain."

Many of Hogarth's characters would form admirable illustrations of Pope's Satires, who was contemporary with him. In short, Hogarth was a painter, not of low but of real life ; and the ridiculous and prominent features of high or low life, "of the great vulgar or the small," lay equally open to him. The country girl, in the first plate of the "Harlot's Progress," coming out of the waggon, is not more simple and ungainly than the same figure, in the second, is thoroughly initiated into the mysteries of her art, and suddenly accomplished in all the airs and graces of affectation, ease, and impudence. The affected languor and imbecility of the same girl afterwards, when put to beat hemp in Bridewell, is exactly in keeping with the character she has been taught to assume. Sir Joshua could do nothing like it in his line of portrait, which differed chiefly in the background. The fine gentleman at his levee, in the "Rake's Progress," is also a complete model of a person of rank and fortune, surrounded by needy and worthless adventurers, fiddlers, poetasters and virtuosi, as was the custom in those days. Lord Chesterfield himself would not have been disgraced by sitting for it. I might multiply examples to show that Hogarth was not characteristically deficient in that kind of elegance

which arises from an habitual attention to external appearance and deportment. I will only add as instances, among his women, the two *élégantes* in the "Bedlam Scene," who are dressed (allowing for the difference of not quite a century) "in the manner of Ackermann's fashions for May"; and among the men, the lawyer in "Modern Midnight Conversation," whose gracious significant leer and sleek lubricated countenance exhibit all the happy finesse of his profession, when a silk gown has been added, or is likely to be added to it; and several figures in the "Cockpit," who are evidently, at the first glance, gentlemen of the old school, and where the mixture of the blacklegs with the higher character is a still further test of the discriminating skill of the painter.

Again, Hogarth had not only a perception of fashion, but a sense of natural beauty. There are as many pleasing faces in his pictures as in Sir Joshua. Witness the girl picking the rake's pocket in the "Bagnio" scene, whom we might suppose to be "the charming Betsy Careless"; the poet's wife, handsomer than falls to the lot of most poets, who are generally more intent upon the idea in their own minds than on the image before them, and are glad to take up with Dulcineas of their own creating; the theatrical heroine in the "Southwark Fair," who would be an accession to either of our play-houses; the girl asleep ogled by the clerk in church-time, and the sweetheart of the "Good Apprentice" in the reading desk, in the second of that series, almost an ideal face and expression; the girl in her cap selected for a partner by the footman in the print of "Morning," very handsome; and many others equally so, scattered like "stray-gifts of love and beauty" through these pictures. Hogarth was not then exclusively the painter of deformity. He painted beauty or ugliness indifferently, as they came in his way; and was not by nature confined to those faces which are painful and disgusting, as many would have us believe.

Again, neither are we to look for the solution of

the difficulty in the difference between the comic and the tragic, between loose laughter and deep passion. For Mr. Lamb has shown unanswerably that Hogarth is quite at home in scenes of the deepest distress, in the heart-rending calamities of common life, in the expression of ungovernable rage, silent despair, or moody madness, enhanced by the tenderest sympathy, or aggravated by the frightful contrast of the most impenetrable and obdurate insensibility, as we see strikingly exemplified in the latter prints of the "Rake's Progress." To the unbeliever in Hogarth's power over the passions and the feelings of the heart, the characters there speak like "the handwriting on the wall." If Mr. Lamb has gone too far in paralleling some of these appalling representations with Shakespeare, he was excusable in being led to set off what may be considered as a staggering paradox against a rooted prejudice. At any rate the inferiority of Hogarth (be it what it may) did not arise from a want of passion and intense feeling; and in this respect he had the advantage over Fielding, for instance, and others of our comic writers, who excelled only in the light and ridiculous. There is in general a distinction, almost an impassable one, between the power of embodying the serious and the ludicrous; but these contradictory faculties were reconciled in Hogarth, as they were in Shakespeare, in Chaucer, and as it is said that they were in another extraordinary and later instance, Garrick's acting.

None of these, then, will do: neither will the most masterly and entire keeping of character lead us to an explanation of the grand and ideal style; for Hogarth possessed the most complete and absolute mastery over the truth and identity of expression and features in his subjects. Every stroke of his pencil tells according to a preconception in his mind. If the eye squints, the mouth is distorted; every feature acts and is acted upon by the rest of the face; even the dress and attitude are such as could be proper to no other figure: the whole is under the influence of one impulse, that of

truth and nature. Look at the heads in the "Cockpit" already mentioned, one of the most masterly of his productions in this way, where the workings of the mind are seen in every muscle of every face ; and the same expression, more intense or relaxed, of hope or of fear, is stamped on each of the characters, so that you could no more transpose any part of one countenance to another, than you could change a profile to a front face. Hogarth was, in one sense, strictly an historical painter : that is, he represented the manners and humours of mankind in action, and their characters by varied expression. Everything in his pictures has life and motion in it. Not only does the business of the scene never stand still, but every feature is put into full play ; the exact feeling of the moment is brought out, and carried to its utmost height, and then instantly seized and stamped on the canvas for ever. The expression is always taken *en passant*, in a state of progress or change, and, as it were, at the salient point. Besides the excellence of each individual face, the reflection of the expression from face to face, the contrast and struggle of particular motives and feelings in the different actors in the scene, as of anger, contempt, laughter, compassion, are conveyed in the happiest and most lively manner. His figures are not like the background on which they are painted : even the pictures on the wall have a peculiar look of their own. All this is effected by a few decisive and rapid touches of the pencil, careless in appearance, but infallible in their results ; so that one great criterion of the grand style insisted on by Sir Joshua Reynolds, that of leaving out the details, and attending to general character and outline, belonged to Hogarth. He did not, indeed, arrive at middle forms or neutral expression, which Sir Joshua makes another test of the ideal ; for Hogarth was not insipid. That was the last fault with which he could be charged. But he had breadth and boldness of manner, as well as any of them ; so that neither does that constitute the ideal.

What then does ? We have reduced this to some-

thing like the last remaining quantity in an equation, where all the others have been ascertained. Hogarth had all the other parts of an original and accomplished genius except this; but this he had not. He had an intense feeling and command over the impressions of sense, of habit, of character, and passion, the serious and the comic, in a word, of nature, as it fell within his own observation, or came within the sphere of his actual experience; but he had little power beyond that sphere, or sympathy with that which existed only in idea. He was "conformed to this world, not transformed." If he attempted to paint Pharaoh's daughter, and Paul before Felix, he lost himself. His mind had feet and hands, but not wings to fly with. There is a mighty world of sense, of custom, of every-day action, of accidents and objects coming home to us, and interesting because they do so; the gross, material, stirring, noisy world of common life and selfish passion, of which Hogarth was absolute lord and master: there is another mightier world, that which exists only in conception and in power, the universe of thought and sentiment, that surrounds and is raised above the ordinary world of reality, as the empyrean surrounds this nether globe, into which few are privileged to soar with mighty wings outspread, and in which, as power is given them to embody their aspiring fancies, to "give to airy nothing a local habitation and a name," to fill with imaginary shapes of beauty or sublimity, and make the dark abyss pregnant, bringing that which is remote home to us, raising themselves to the lofty, sustaining themselves on the refined and abstracted, making all things like not what we know and feel in ourselves, in this "ignorant present" time, but like what they must be in themselves, or in our noblest idea of them, and stamping that idea with reality (but chiefly clothing the best and the highest with grace and grandeur): this is the ideal in art, in poetry, and in painting. There are things which are cognizable only to sense, which interest only our more

immediate instincts and passions: the want of food, the loss of a limb, or of a sum of money; there are others that appeal to different and nobler faculties: the wants of the mind, the hunger and thirst after truth and beauty—that is, to faculties commensurate with objects greater and of greater refinement, which to be grand must extend beyond ourselves to others, and our interest in which must be refined in proportion as they do so.<sup>1</sup> The interest in these subjects is in proportion to the power of conceiving them, and the power of conceiving them is in proportion to the interest and affection for them, to the innate bias of the mind to elevate itself above everything low, and purify itself from everything gross. Hogarth only transcribes or transposes what was tangible and visible, not the abstracted and intelligible. You see in his pictures only the faces which you yourself have seen, or others like them; none of his characters are thinking of any person or thing out of the picture; you are only interested in the objects of their contention or pursuit, because they themselves are interested in them. There is nothing remote in thought, or comprehensive in feeling. The whole is intensely personal and local, but the interest of the ideal and poetical style of art relates to more permanent and universal objects; and the characters and forms must be such as to correspond with and sustain that interest, and give external grace and dignity to it. Such were the subjects which Raphael chose; faces imbued with unalterable sentiment, and figures that stand in the eternal silence of thought. He places before you objects of everlasting interest, events of greatest magnitude, and persons in them fit

<sup>1</sup> When Meg Merrilies says in her dying moments—"Nay, nay, lay my head to the East," what was the East to her? Not a reality, but an idea of distant time and the land of her forefathers; the last, the strongest, and the best that occurred to her in this world. Her gipsy slang and dress were quaint and grotesque; her attachment to the Kaim of Derncleugh and the wood of Warrock was romantic; her worship of the East was ideal.

for the scene and action—warriors and kings, princes and nobles, and greater yet, poets and philosophers, and mightier than these, patriarchs and apostles, prophets and founders of religion, saints and martyrs, angels and the Son of God. We know their importance and their high calling, and we feel that they do not belie it. We see them as they were painted, with the eye of faith. The light which they have kindled in the world is reflected back upon their faces ; the awe and homage which has been paid to them is seated upon their brow, and encircles them like a glory. All those who come before them are conscious of a superior presence. For example, the beggars in the *Gate Beautiful* are impressed with this ideal borrowed character. Would not the cripple and the halt feel a difference of sensation, and express it outwardly in such circumstances ? And was the painter wrong to transfer this sense of preternatural power and the confidence of a saving faith to his canvas ? Hogarth's "*Pool of Bethesda*," on the contrary, is only a collection of common beggars receiving an alms. The waters may be stirred, but the mind is not stirred with them. The fowls, again, in the "*Miraculous Draught of Fishes*," exult and clap their wings, and seem lifted up with some unusual cause of joy. There is not the same expansive, elevated principle in Hogarth. He has amiable and praiseworthy characters, indeed, among his bad ones. The master of the industrious and idle apprentice is a good citizen and a virtuous man ; but his benevolence is mechanical and confined ; it extends only to his shop, or, at most, to his ward. His face is not ruffled by passion, nor is it inspired by thought. To give another instance, the face of the faithful female fainting in the prison-scene in the "*Rake's Progress*," is more one of effeminate softness than of disinterested tenderness, or heroic constancy. But in the pictures of the "*Mother and Child*," by Raphael and Leonardo da Vinci, we see all the tenderness purified from all the weakness of maternal affection, and exalted by the

prospects of religious faith ; so that the piety and devotion of future generations seems to add its weight to the expression of feminine sweetness and parental love, to press upon the heart, and breathe in the countenance. This is the ideal, passion blended with thought and pointing to distant objects, not debased by grossness, not thwarted by accident, not weakened by familiarity, but connected with forms and circumstances that give the utmost possible expansion and refinement to the general sentiment. With all my admiration of Hogarth, I cannot think him equal to Raphael. I do not know whether if the portfolio were opened, I would not as soon look over the prints of Hogarth as those of Raphael ; but assuredly, if the question were put to me, I would sooner never have seen the prints of Hogarth than never have seen those of Raphael. It is many years ago since I first saw the prints of the "Cartoons" hanging round the old-fashioned parlour of a little inn in a remote part of the country. I was then young : I had heard of the fame of the "Cartoons," but this was the first time I had ever been admitted face to face into the presence of those divine works. "How was I then uplifted !" Prophets and apostles stood before me as in a dream, and the Saviour of the Christian world with his attributes of faith and power ; miracles were working on the walls ; the hand of Raphael was there ; and as his pencil traced the lines, I saw godlike spirits and lofty shapes descend and walk visibly the earth, but as if their thoughts still lifted them above the earth. There I saw the figure of St. Paul, pointing with noble fervour to "temples not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" ; and that finer one of Christ in the boat, whose whole figure seems sustained by meekness and love ; and that of the same person surrounded by his disciples, like a flock of sheep listening to the music of some divine shepherd. I knew not how enough to admire them. If from this transport and delight there arose in my breast a wish, a deep aspiration of mingled hope and fear to be able one

day to do something like them, that hope has long since vanished ; but not with it the love of art, nor delight in the works of art, nor admiration of the genius which produces them, nor respect for fame which rewards and crowns them ! Later in life, I saw other works of this great painter (with more like them) collected in the Louvre, where Art at that time lifted up her head, and was seated on her throne, and said, "All eyes shall see me, and all knees shall bow to me !" Honour was done to her and all hers. There was her treasure, and there the inventory of all she had. There she had gathered together her pomp, and there was her shrine, and there her votaries came and worshipped as in a temple. The crown she wore was brighter than that of kings. Where the struggles for human liberty had been there were the triumphs of human genius. For there, in the Louvre, were the precious monuments of art ; there "stood the statue that enchanteth the world" ; there was "Apollo," the "Laocoon," the "Dying Gladiator," the head of the "Antinous," "Diana with her Fawn," the "Muses and the Graces" in a ring, and all the glories of the antique world :—

"There was old Proteus coming from the sea,  
And wreathed Triton blew his winding horn."

There, too, were the two "St. Jeromes," Correggio's and Domenichino's ; there was Raphael's "Transfiguration," the "St. Mark" of Tintoret, Paul Veronese's "Marriage of Cana," the "Deluge" of Poussin, and Titian's "St. Peter Martyr." It was there that I learned to become an enthusiast of the lasting works of the great painters, and of their names no less magnificent : grateful to the heart as the sound of celestial harmony from other spheres, waking around us (whether heard or not) from youth to age ; the stay, the guide and anchor of our purest thoughts ; whom, having once seen, we always remember, and who teach us to see all things through them ; without whom life would be to begin

again, and the earth barren ; of Raphael, who lifted the human form half-way to Heaven ; of Titian, who painted the mind in the face, and unfolded the soul of things to the eye ; of Rubens, around whose pencil gorgeous shapes thronged numberless, startling us by the novel accidents of form and colour, putting the spirit of motion into the universe, and weaving a gay fantastic round and bacchanalian dance with nature ; of Rembrandt, too, who "smoothed the raven down of darkness till it smiled," and tinged it with a light like streaks of burnished ore ; of these, and more than these, of whom the world was scarce worthy, and for the loss of whom nothing could console me—not even the works of Hogarth !

## LECTURE VIII

## ON THE COMIC WRITERS OF THE LAST CENTURY

THE question which has been often asked, "Why there are comparatively so few good modern comedies?" appears in a great measure to answer itself. It is because so many excellent comedies have been written, that there are none written at present. Comedy naturally wears itself out—destroys the very food on which it lives; and by constantly and successfully exposing the follies and weaknesses of mankind to ridicule, in the end leaves itself nothing worth laughing at. It holds the mirror up to nature, and men seeing their most striking peculiarities and defects pass in gay review before them, learn either to avoid or conceal them. It is not the criticism which the public taste exercises upon the stage, but the criticism which the stage exercises upon public manners that is fatal to comedy, by rendering the subject-matter of it tame, correct, and spiritless. We are drilled into a sort of stupid decorum, and forced to wear the same dull uniform of outward appearance; and yet it is asked, why the Comic Muse does not point, as she was wont, at the peculiarities of our gait and gesture, and exhibit the picturesque contrasts of our dress and costume, in all that graceful variety in which she delights. The genuine source of comic writing,

"Where it must live, or have no life at all,"

is undoubtedly to be found in the distinguishing peculiarities of men and manners. Now this distinction can subsist, so as to be strong, pointed, and general, only while the manners of different classes are formed almost immediately by their particular circumstances,

and the characters of individuals by their natural temperament and situation, without being everlastingly modified and neutralized by intercourse with the world —by knowledge and education. In a certain stage of society, men may be said to vegetate like trees, and to become rooted to the soil in which they grow. They have no idea of anything beyond themselves and their immediate sphere of action ; they are, as it were, circumscribed, and defined by their particular circumstances ; they are what their situation makes them, and nothing more. Each is absorbed in his own profession or pursuit, and each in his turn contracts that habitual peculiarity of manners and opinions which makes him the subject of ridicule to others, and the sport of the Comic Muse. Thus the physician is nothing but a physician, the lawyer is a mere lawyer, the scholar degenerates into a pedant, the country squire is a different species of being from the fine gentleman, the citizen and the courtier inhabit each a different world, and even the affectation of certain characters, in aping the follies or vices of their betters, only serves to show the immeasurable distance which custom or fortune has placed between them. Hence the earlier comic writers, taking advantage of this mixed and solid mass of ignorance, folly, pride, and prejudice, made those deep and lasting incisions into it,—have given those sharp and nice touches, that bold relief to their characters,—have opposed them in every variety of contrast and collision, of conscious self-satisfaction and mutual antipathy, with a power which can only find full scope in the same rich and inexhaustible materials. But in proportion as comic genius succeeds in taking off the mask from ignorance and conceit, as it teaches us

"To see ourselves as others see us,"—

in proportion as we are brought out on the stage together, and our prejudices clash one against the other, our sharp angular points wear off ; we are no longer rigid in absurdity, passionate in folly, and we

prevent the ridicule directed at our habitual foibles by laughing at them ourselves.

If it be said, that there is the same fund of absurdity and prejudice in the world as ever—that there are the same unaccountable perversities lurking at the bottom of every breast,—I should answer, Be it so: but at least we keep our follies to ourselves as much as possible; we palliate, shuffle, and equivocate with them; they sneak into by-corners, and do not, like Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims, march along the high road, and form a procession; they do not entrench themselves strongly behind custom and precedent; they are not embodied in professions and ranks in life; they are not organized into a system; they do not openly resort to a standard, but are a sort of straggling nondescripts, that, like Wart, "present no mark to the foeman." As to the gross and palpable absurdities of modern manners, they are too shallow and barefaced, and those who affect are too little serious in them, to make them worth the detection of the Comic Muse. They proceed from an idle, impudent affectation of folly in general, in the dashing bravura style, not from an infatuation with any of its characteristic modes. In short, the proper object of ridicule is egotism: and a man cannot be a very great egotist, who every day sees himself represented on the stage. We are deficient in comedy, because we are without characters in real life—as we have no historical pictures, because we have no faces proper for them.

It is, indeed, the evident tendency of all literature to generalize and dissipate character, by giving men the same artificial education, and the same common stock of ideas; so that we see all objects from the same point of view, and through the same reflected medium;—we learn to exist, not in ourselves, but in books;—all men become alike mere readers—spectators, not actors in the scene, and lose their proper personal identity. The templar, the wit, the man of pleasure, and the man of fashion, the courtier and the citizen, the knight and the squire, the lover and

the miser—Lovelace, Lothario, Will Honeycomb, and Sir Roger de Coverley, Sparkish and Lord Foppington, Western and Tom Jones, My Father and My Uncle Toby, Millamant and Sir Sampson Legend, Don Quixote and Sancho, Gil Blas and Guzman d'Alfarache, Count Fathom and Joseph Surface,—have met and exchanged commonplaces on the barren plains of the *haute littérature*—toil slowly on to the temple of science, “seen a long way off upon a level,” and end in one dull compound of politics, criticism, chemistry, and metaphysics!

We cannot expect to reconcile opposite things. If, for example, any of us were to put ourselves into the stage-coach from Salisbury to London, it is more than probable we should not meet with the same number of odd accidents, or ludicrous distresses on the road, that befell Parson Adams; but why, if we get into a common vehicle, and submit to the conveniences of modern travelling, should we complain of the want of adventures? Modern manners may be compared to a modern stage-coach; our limbs may be a little cramped with the confinement, and we may grow drowsy, but we arrive safe, without any very amusing or very sad accident, at our journey's end.

In this theory I have, at least, the authority of Sterne and the “Tatler” on my side, who attribute the greater variety and richness of comic excellency in our writers, to the greater variety and distinctness of character among ourselves; the roughness of the texture and the sharp angles not being worn out by the artificial refinements of intellect, or the frequent collision of social intercourse.—It has been argued on the other hand, indeed, that this circumstance makes against me; that the suppression of the grosser indications of absurdity ought to stimulate and give scope to the ingenuity and penetration of the comic writer who is to detect them; that the progress of wit and humour ought to keep pace with critical distinctions and metaphysical niceties; [that the more we are

become like one another, or like nothing, the less distinction of character we have, the greater discrimination must it require to bring it out ; that the less ridiculous our manners become, the more scope do they afford for art and ingenuity in discovering our weak sides and shades of infirmity, and that the greatest sameness and monotony, must in the end produce the most exquisite variety. What a pity it is, that so ingenious a theory should not have the facts on its side ; and that the perfection of satire should not be found to keep pace with the want of materials. It is rather too much to assume on a mere hypothesis, that the present manners are equally favourable to the production of the highest comic excellence, till they do produce it. Even in France, where encouragement is given to the noblest and most successful exertions of genius by the sure prospect of profit to yourself or your descendants, every time your piece is acted in any corner of the empire,—we find the best critics going back to the grossness and illiberality of the age of Louis XIV for the production of the best comedies ; which is rather extraordinary, considering the infinitely refined state of manners in France, and the infinite encouragement given to dramatic talent. But there is a difference between refinement and imbecility, between general knowledge and personal elegance, between metaphysical subtlety and stage-effect. All manners, all kinds of folly, and all shades of character are not equally fit for dramatic representation. There is a point where minuteness of distinction becomes laborious foolery, and where the slenderness of the materials must baffle the skill and destroy the exertions of the artist. A critic of this sort will insist, indeed, on pulling off the mask of folly, by some ingenious device, though she has been stripped of it long ago, and forced to compose her features into a decent appearance of gravity ; and apply a microscope of a new construction to detect the freckles on her face and inequalities in her skin, in order to communicate amus-

ing discoveries to the audience, as some philosophical lecturer does the results of his chemical experiments on the decomposition of substances to the admiring circle. There is no end of this. His penetrating eye is infinitely delighted with the grotesque appearance of so many imperceptible deviations from a right line, and mathematical inclinations from the perpendicular. The picture of the "Flamborough Family," painted with each an orange in his hand, must have been a masterpiece of nice discrimination and graceful inflection. Upon this principle of going to work the wrong way, and of making something out of nothing, we must reverse all our rules of taste and common sense. No comedy can be perfect till the *dramatis personæ* might be reversed without creating much confusion; or the ingredients of character ought to be so blended and poured repeatedly from one vessel into another, that the difference would be perceptible only to the finest palate. Thus, if Molière had lived in the present day, he would not have drawn his "Avare," his "Tartuffe," and his "Misanthrope" with those strong touches and violent contrasts which he has done, but with those delicate traits which are common to human nature in general, that is, his Miser without avarice, his Hypocrite without design, and his Misanthrope without disgust at the vices of mankind;] these theorists, in short, have been sanguine enough to expect a regular advance from grossness to refinement in wit and pleasantry, on the stage and in real life, marked on a graduated scale of human perfectibility, and have been hence led to imagine that the best of our old comedies were no better than the coarse jests of a set of country clowns—a sort of *comédies bourgeoisées*, compared with the admirable productions which might, but have not, been written in our times. I must protest against this theory altogether, which would go to degrade genteel comedy from a high court lady into a literary prostitute. I do not know what these persons mean by refinement in this instance. Do they find none in

Millamant and her morning dreams, in Sir Roger de Coverley and his widow? Did not Etherege, Wycherley, Suckling, and Congreve, approach tolerably near

"—— the ring  
Of mimic statesmen and their merry king"!

Is there no distinction between an Angelica and a Miss Prue, a Valentine, a Tattle, and a Ben? Where, in the annals of modern literature, shall we find anything more refined, more deliberate, more abstracted in vice than the nobleman in "Amelia"? Are not the compliments which Pope paid to his friends, to Murray and to Cornbury, equal in taste and elegance to any which have been paid since? Are there no traits in Sterne? Is not Richardson minute enough? Must we part with Sophia Western and her muff, and Clarissa Harlowe's "preferable regards" for the loves of the plants and the triangles? Or shall we say that the Berinthias and Alitheas of former times were mere rustics, because they did not, like our modern belles, subscribe to circulating libraries, read "Beppo," prefer "Gertrude of Wyoming" to the "Lady of the Lake," or the "Lady of the Lake" to "Gertrude of Wyoming," differ in their sentiments on points of taste or systems of mineralogy, compose learned treatises, and deliver dissertations on the arts with Corinna of Italy? They had something else to do and to talk about. They were employed in reality, as we see them on the stage, in setting off their charms to the greatest advantage, in mortifying their rivals by the most pointed irony, and trifling with their lovers with infinite address. The height of comic elegance and refinement is not to be found in the general diffusion of knowledge and civilization, which tends to level and neutralize, but in the pride of individual distinction, and the contrast between the conflicting pretensions of different ranks in society. [The beauty of these writers in general was that they gave every kind and gradation of character, and they did this because their portraits were taken from life. They were true to nature, full of

meaning, perfectly understood and executed in every part. Their coarseness was not mere vulgarity, their refinement was not a mere negation of precision. They refined upon characters, instead of refining them away. Their refinement consisted in working out the parts, not in leaving a vague outline. They painted human nature as it was, and as they saw it with individual character and circumstances, not human nature in general, abstracted from time, place, and circumstance. Strength and refinement are so far from being incompatible, that they assist each other, as the hardest bodies admit of the finest touches and the brightest polish. But there are some minds that never understand anything, but by a negation of its opposite. There is a strength without refinement, which is grossness, as there is a refinement without strength or effect, which is insipidity. Neither are grossness and refinement of manners inconsistent with each other in the same period. The grossness of one class adds to the refinement of another, by circumscribing it, by rendering the feeling more pointed and exquisite, by irritating our self-love, &c. There can be no great refinement of character where there is no distinction of persons. The character of a gentleman is a relative term. The diffusion of knowledge, of artificial and intellectual equality, tends to level this distinction, and to confound that nice perception and high sense of honour, which arises from conspicuousness of situation, and a perpetual attention to personal propriety, and the claims of personal respect. It is common, I think, to mistake refinement of individual character for general knowledge and intellectual subtlety, with which it has little more to do than with the dexterity of a rope dancer or juggler. The age of chivalry is gone with the improvements in the art of war, which superseded personal courage, and the character of a gentleman must disappear with those refinements in intellect which render the advantages of rank and situation common almost to any one. The bag-wig and sword followed the helmet and spear, when these

outward insignia no longer implied a real superiority, and were a distinction without a difference. Even the grossness of a state of mixed and various manners receives a degree of refinement from contrast and opposition, by being defined and implicated with circumstances. The Upholsterer in "The Tatler" is not a mere vulgar politician. His intense feeling of interest and curiosity about what does not at all concern him, displays itself in the smallest things, assumes the most eccentric forms, and the peculiarity of his absurdity masks itself under various shifts and evasions, which the same folly, when it becomes epidemic and universal, as it has since done, would not have occasion to resort to. In general it is only in a state of mere barbarism or indiscriminate refinement that we are to look for extreme grossness or complete insipidity. Our modern dramatists, indeed, have happily contrived to unite both extremes. *Omne tulit punctum.* On a soft ground of sentiment they have daubed in the gross absurdities of modern manners void of character, have blended romantic waiting-maids with jockey noblemen, and the humours of the four-in-hand club, and fill up the piece by some vile and illiberal caricature of particular individuals known on the town.

Some persons are for refining comedy into a pure intellectual abstraction, the shadow of a shade. Will they forgive me if I suggest, as an addition to this theory, that the drama in general might be constructed on the same abstruse and philosophical principles? As they imagine that the finest comedies may be formed without individual character, so the deepest tragedies might be composed without real passion. The slightest and most ridiculous distresses might be improved, by art and metaphysical aid, into the most affecting scenes. A young man might naturally be introduced as the hero of a philosophic drama, who had lost the gold medal for a prize-poem; or a young lady, whose verses had been severely criticized in the reviews. Nothing could come amiss to this rage for speculative refinement; or the actors might be supposed to come forward, not in

any character, but as a sort of chorus, reciting speeches on the general miseries of the human life, or reading alternately a passage out of Seneca's "Morals" or Voltaire's "Candide." This might by some be thought a great improvement on English tragedy, or even on the French.

The whole of such reasoning proceeds on a total misconception of the nature of the drama itself. It confounds philosophy with poetry, laboured analysis with intuitive perception, general truth with individual observation. It makes the Comic Muse a dealer in riddles, and an expounder of hieroglyphics, and a taste for dramatic excellence, a species of the second sight. It would have the drama to be the most remote, whereas it is the most substantial and real of all things. It represents not only looks, but motion and speech. The painter gives only the former, looks without action or speech, and the mere writer only the latter, words without looks or action. Its business and its use is to express the thoughts and character in the most striking and instantaneous manner, in the manner most like reality. It conveys them in all their truth and subtlety, but in all their force and with all possible effect. It brings them into action, obtrudes them on the sight, embodies them in habits, in gestures, in dress, in circumstances, and in speech. It renders everything overt and ostensible, and presents human nature not in its elementary principles or by general reflections, but exhibits its essential qualities in all their variety of combination, and furnishes subjects for perpetual reflection.

But the instant we begin to refine and generalize beyond a certain point, we are reduced to abstraction, and compelled to see things, not as individuals, or as connected with action and circumstances, but as universal truths, applicable in a degree to all things, and in their extent to none, which therefore it would be absurd to predicate of individuals, or to represent to the senses. The habit, too, of detaching these abstract species and fragments of nature, destroys the power

of combining them in complex characters, in every degree of force and variety. The concrete and the abstract cannot co-exist in the same mind. We accordingly find, that to genuine comedy succeed satire and novels, the one dealing in general character and description, and the other making out particulars by the assistance of narrative and comment. Afterwards come traits, and collections of anecdotes, bon mots, topics, and quotations, &c., which are applicable to any one, and are just as good told of one person as another. Thus the trio in the Memoirs of M. Grimm, attributed to three celebrated characters, on the death of a fourth, might have the names reversed, and would lose nothing of its effect. In general these traits which are so much admired, are a sort of systematic libels on human nature, which make up, by their malice and acuteness, for their want of wit and sense.

Sir Richard Steele thought that the excellence of the English in comedy was in a great measure owing to the originality and variety of character among them. With respect to that extreme refinement of taste which Madame de Staël advocates to the French, they are neither entirely without it, nor have they so much as they think. The two most refined things in the world are the story of the Falcon in Boccaccio, and the character of Griselda in Chaucer, of neither of which the French would have the smallest conception, because they do not depend on traits, or minute circumstances, or turns of expression, but in infinite simplicity and truth, and an everlasting sentiment. We might retort upon Madame de Staël what she sometimes says in her own defence—"That we understand all in other writers that is worth understanding." As to Molière, he is quite out of the present question; he lived long before the era of French philosophy and refinement, and is besides almost an English author, quite a *barbare*, in all in which he excels. To suppose that we can go on refining for ever with vivacity and effect, embodying vague abstractions, and particularizing flimsy generalities—"showing the very body of the

age, its form and pressure," though it has neither form nor pressure left—seems to me the height of speculative absurdity. That undefined "frivolous space," beyond which Madame de Staël regards as "the region of taste and elegance," is, indeed, nothing but the very limbo of vanity, the land of chiromancy and occult conceit, and paradise of fools, where,

"None yet, but store hereafter from the earth  
Shall, like aerial vapours, upward rise  
Of all things transitory and vain."]'

The alterations which have taken place in conversation and dress, in consequence of the change of manners in the same period, have been by no means favourable to comedy. The present prevailing style of conversation is not personal, but critical and analytical. It consists almost entirely in the discussion of general topics, in ascertaining the merits of authors and their works; and Congreve would be able to derive no better hints from the conversations of our toilettes or drawing-rooms, for the exquisite raillery or poignant repartee of his dialogues, than from a deliberation of the Royal Society. In like manner, the extreme simplicity and graceful uniformity of modern dress, however favourable to the arts, has certainly stripped comedy of one of its richest ornaments and most expressive symbols. The sweeping pall, and buskin, and nodding plume were never more serviceable to tragedy, than the enormous hoops and stiff stays worn by the belles of former days, were to the intrigues of comedy. They assisted wonderfully in heightening the mysteries of the passion, and adding to the intricacy of the plot. Wycherley and Vanbrugh could not have spared the dresses of Vandyke. These strange fancy-costumes, perverse disguises, and counterfeit shapes gave an agreeable scope to the imagination. "That seven-fold fence" was a sort of foil to the lusciousness of the dialogue, and a barrier against the sly encroachments of *double entendre*. The greedy eye and bold hand of indiscretion were

repressed, which gave a greater licence to the tongue. The senses were not to be gratified in an instant. Love was entangled in the folds of the swelling handkerchief, and the desires might wander for ever round the circumference of a quilted petticoat, or find a rich lodging in the folds of a damask stomacher. There was room for years of patient contrivance, for a thousand thoughts, schemes, conjectures, hopes, fears, and wishes. There seemed no end of obstacles and delays ; to overcome so many difficulties was the work of ages. A mistress was an angel, concealed behind whalebone, flounces, and brocade. What an undertaking to penetrate through the disguise ! What an impulse must it give to the blood, what a keenness to the invention, what a volubility to the tongue ! "Mr. Smirk, you are a brisk man," was then the most significant commendation ; but nowadays, a woman can be but undressed ! Again, the character of the fine gentleman is at present a little obscured on the stage, nor do we immediately recognize it elsewhere, for want of the formidable *insignia* of a bag-wig and sword. Without these outward credentials, the public must not only be unable to distinguish this character intuitively, but it must be "almost afraid to know itself." The present simple disguise of a gentleman is like the *incognito* of kings. The opinion of others affects our opinion of ourselves ; and we can hardly expect from a modern man of fashion that air of dignity and superior gracefulness of carriage which those must have assumed who were conscious that all eyes were upon them, and that their lofty pretensions continually exposed them either to public scorn or challenged public admiration. A lord who should take the wall of the plebeian passengers without a sword by his side, would hardly have his claim of precedence acknowledged ; nor could he be supposed to have that obsolete air of self-importance about him, which should alone clear the pavement at his approach. It is curious how an ingenious actor of the present day (Mr. Farren) should play Lord Ogleby so well as he does, having

never seen anything of the sort in reality. A nobleman in full costume and in broad day, would be a phenomenon like the lord mayor's coach. The attempt at getting up genteel comedy at present is a sort of galvanic experiment, a revival of the dead.

There is a certain stage of society in which people become conscious of their peculiarities and absurdities, affect to disguise what they are, and set up pretensions to what they are not. This gives rise to a corresponding style of comedy, the object of which is to detect the disguises of self-love, and to make reprisals on these preposterous assumptions of vanity, by marking the contrast between the real and the affected character as severely as possible, and denying to those, who would impose on us for what they are not, even the merit which they have. This is the comedy of artificial life, of wit and satire, such as we see it in Congreve, Wycherley, Vanbrugh, &c. To this succeeds a state of society from which the same sort of affectation and pretence are banished by a greater knowledge of the world, or by their successful exposure on the stage; and which, by neutralizing the materials of comic character, both natural and artificial, leaves no comedy at all—but *the sentimental*. Such is our modern comedy. There is a period in the progress of manners anterior to both these, in which the foibles and follies of individuals are of nature's planting, not the growth of art or study; in which they are therefore unconscious of them themselves, or care not who knows them, if they can but have their whim out; and in which, as there is no attempt at imposition, the spectators rather receive pleasure from humouring the inclinations of the persons they laugh at, than wish to give them pain by exposing their absurdity. This may be called the comedy of nature, and it is the comedy which we generally find in Shakespeare.

I have observed in a former lecture, that the most spirited era of our comic drama was that which reflected the conversation, tone, and manners of the profligate, but witty age of Charles II. With the

graver and more business-like turn which the Revolution probably gave to our minds, comedy stooped from her bolder and more fantastic flights ; and the ferocious attack made by the nonjuring divine, Jeremy Collier, on the immorality and profaneness of the plays then chiefly in vogue, nearly frightened those unwarrantable liberties of wit and humour from the stage which were no longer countenanced at Court nor copied in the city. Almost the last of our writers who ventured to hold out in the prohibited track was a female adventurer, Mrs. Centlivre, who seemed to take advantage of the privilege of her sex, and to set at defiance the cynical denunciations of the angry puritanical reformist. Her plays have a provoking spirit and volatile salt in them, which still preserves them from decay. Congreve is said to have been jealous of their success at the time, and that it was one cause which drove him in disgust from the stage. If so, it was without any good reason, for these plays have great and intrinsic merit in them, which entitled them to their popularity (and it is only spurious and undeserved popularity which should excite a feeling of jealousy in any well-regulated mind) : and besides, their merit was of a kind entirely different from his own. The "Wonder" and the "Busy Body" are properly comedies of intrigue. Their interest depends chiefly on the intricate involution and artful *dénouement* of the plot, which has a strong tincture of mischief in it, and the wit is seasoned by the archness of the humour and sly allusion to the most delicate points. They are plays evidently written by a very clever woman, but still by a woman : for I hold, in spite of any fanciful theories to the contrary, that there is a distinction discernible in the minds of women as well as in their faces. The "Wonder" is one of the best of our acting plays. The passion of jealousy in Don Felix is managed in such a way as to give as little offence as possible to the audience, for every appearance combines to excite and confirm his worst suspicions, while we, who are in the secret, laugh at his ground-

less uneasiness and apprehensions. The ambiguity of the heroine's situation, which is like a continued practical *equivoque*, gives rise to a quick succession of causeless alarms, subtle excuses, and the most hair-breadth 'scapes. The scene near the end, in which Don Felix, pretending to be drunk, forces his way out of Don Manuel's house, who wants to keep him a prisoner, by producing his marriage-contract in the shape of a pocket-pistol, with the terrors and confusion into which the old gentleman is thrown by this sort of *argumentum ad hominem*, is one of the richest treats the stage affords, and calls forth incessant peals of laughter and applause. Besides the two principal characters (Violante and Don Felix), Lissardo and Flippanta come in very well to carry on the under-plot; and the airs and graces of an amorous waiting-maid and conceited man-servant, each copying after their master and mistress, were never hit off with more natural volubility or affected *nonchalance* than in this enviable couple. Lissardo's playing off the diamond ring before the eyes of his mortified Dulcinea, and aping his master's absent manner while repeating—"Roast me these Violantes," as well as the jealous quarrel of the two waiting-maids, which threatens to end in some very extraordinary discoveries, are among the most amusing traits in this comedy. Colonel Briton, the lover of Clara, is a spirited and enterprising soldier of fortune; and his servant Gibby's undaunted, incorrigible blundering, with a dash of nationality in it, tells in a very edifying way.—"The Busy Body" is inferior, in the interest of the story and characters, to the "Wonder"; but it is full of bustle and gaiety from beginning to end. The plot never stands still; the situations succeed one another like the changes of machinery in a pantomime. The nice dove-tailing of the incidents, and cross-reading in the situations, supplies the place of any great force of wit or sentiment. The time for the entrance of each person on the stage is the moment when they are least wanted, and when their arrival makes either

themselves or somebody else look as foolish as possible. The laughableness of this comedy, as well as of "The Wonder," depends on a brilliant series of mistimed exits and entrances. Marplot is the whimsical hero of the piece, and a standing memorial of unmeaning vivacity and assiduous impertinence.

[“The Busy Body” is a comedy that has now held possession of the stage above a hundred years (the best test of excellence); and the merit that has enabled it to do so, consists in the ingenuity of the contrivance, the liveliness of the plot, and the striking effect of the situations. Mrs. Centlivre, in this and her other plays, could do nothing without a stratagem; but she could do everything with one. She delights in putting her *dramatis personæ* continually at their wits' end, and in helping them off with a new evasion; and the subtlety of her resources is in proportion to the criticalness of the situation and the shortness of the notice for resorting to an expedient. Twenty times, in seeing or reading one of her plays, your pulse beats quick, and you become restless and apprehensive for the event; but with a fine theatrical sleight of hand, she lets you off, undoes the knot of the difficulty, and you breathe freely again, and have a hearty laugh into the bargain. In short, with her knowledge of chambermaids' tricks, and insight into the intricate foldings of lovers' hearts, she plays with the events of comedy, as a juggler shuffles about a pack of cards, to serve his own purposes, and to the surprise of the spectator. This is one of the most delightful employments of the dramatic art. It costs nothing—but a voluntary tax on the inventive powers of the author; and it produces, when successfully done, profit and praise to one party, and pleasure to all. To show the extent and importance of theatrical amusements (which some grave persons would decry altogether, and which no one can extol too highly), a friend of ours, whose name will be as well known to posterity as it is to his contemporaries, was not long ago mentioning, that one of the earliest and most memorable impressions ever made on his mind, was

the seeing "Venice Preserved" acted in a country town when he was only nine years old. But he added, that an elderly lady who took him to see it, lamented, notwithstanding the wonder and delight he had experienced, that instead of "Venice Preserved," they had not gone to see "The Busy Body," which had been acted the night before. This was fifty years ago, since which, and for fifty years before that, it has been acted a thousand times in town and country, giving delight to the old, the young, and middle-aged, passing the time carelessly, and affording matter for agreeable reflection afterwards, making us think ourselves, and wish to be thought, the men equal to Sir George Airy in grace and spirit, the women to Miranda and Isabinda in love and beauty, and all of us superior to Marplot in wit. Among the scenes that might be mentioned in this comedy, as striking instances of happy stage effect, are Miranda's contrivance to escape from Sir George, by making him turn his back upon her to hear her confession of love, and the ludicrous attitude in which he is left waiting for the rest of her speech after the lady has vanished; his offer of the hundred pounds to her guardian to make love to her in his presence, and when she receives him in dumb show, his answering for both; his situation concealed behind the chimney-screen; his supposed metamorphosis into a monkey, and his deliverance from thence in that character by the interference of Marplot; Mrs. Patch's sudden conversion of the mysterious love letter into a charm for the tooth-ache, and the whole of Marplot's meddling and blunders. The last character is taken from Dryden and the Duchess of Newcastle; and is, indeed, the only attempt at character in the play. It is amusing and superficial. We see little of the puzzled perplexity of his brain, but his actions are absurd enough. He whiffles about the stage with considerable volubility, and makes a very lively automaton. Sir George Airy sets out for a scene or two in a spirited manner, but afterwards the character evaporates in the name; and he becomes as commonplace as his friend Charles, who merely laments

over his misfortunes, or gets out of them by following the suggestions of his valet or his valet's mistress. Miranda is the heroine of the piece, and has a right to be so ; for she is a beauty and an heiress. Her friend has less to recommend her ; but who can refuse to fall in love with her name ? What volumes of sighs, what a world of love, is breathed in the very sound alone—the letters that form the charming name of Isabinda ! ]

The comedies of Steele were the first that were written expressly with a view not to imitate the manners, but to reform the morals of the age. The author seems to be all the time on his good behaviour, as if writing a comedy was no very creditable employment, and as if the ultimate object of his ambition was a dedication to the queen. Nothing can be better meant, or more inefficient. It is almost a misnomer to call them comedies ; they are rather homilies in dialogue, in which a number of very pretty ladies and gentlemen discuss the fashionable topics of gaming, of duelling, of seduction, of scandal, &c., with a sickly sensibility, that shows as little hearty aversion to vice as sincere attachment to virtue. By not meeting the question fairly on the ground of common experience, by slurring over the objections, and varnishing the answers, the whole distinction between virtue and vice (as it appears in evidence in the comic drama) is reduced to verbal professions, and a mechanical, infantine goodness. The sting is, indeed, taken out of what is bad ; but what is good, at the same time, loses its manhood and nobility of nature by this enervating process. I am unwilling to believe that the only difference between right and wrong is mere cant, or make-believe ; and I imagine, that the advantage which the moral drama possesses over mere theoretical precept or general declamation is this, that by being left free to imitate nature as it is, and not being referred to an ideal standard, it is its own voucher for the truth of the inferences it draws, for its warnings, or its examples ; that it brings out the higher as well as lower principles of action, in the most striking and convincing

points of view ; satisfies us that virtue is not a mere shadow ; clothes it with passion, imagination, reality, and, if I may so say, translates morality from the language of theory into that of practice. But Steele, by introducing the artificial mechanism of morals on the stage, and making his characters act, not from individual motives and existing circumstances, the truth of which every one must feel, but from vague topics and general rules, the truth of which is the very thing to be proved in detail, has lost that fine vantage ground which the stage lends to virtue ; takes away from it its best grace, the grace of sincerity ; and, instead of making it a test of truth, has made it an echo of the doctrine of the schools—and “the one cries *Mum*, while t’other cries *Budget!*” The comic writer, in my judgment, then, ought to open the volume of nature and the world for his living materials, and not take them out of his ethical commonplace-book ; for in this way, neither will throw any additional light upon the other. In all things there is a division of labour ; and I am as little for introducing the tone of the pulpit or reading-desk on the stage, as for introducing plays and interludes in church-time, according to the good old popish practice. It was a part, indeed, of Steele’s plan, “by the politeness of his style and the genteelness of his expressions,”<sup>1</sup> to bring about a reconciliation between things which he thought had hitherto been kept too far asunder, to wed the graces to the virtues, and blend pleasure with profit. And in this design he succeeded admirably in his “*Tatler*,” and some other works, but in his comedies he has failed. He has confounded instead of harmonizing —has taken away its gravity from wisdom, and its charm from gaiety. It is not that in his plays we find “some soul of goodness in things evil”; but they have no soul either of good or bad. His “*Funeral*” is as trite, as tedious, and full of formal grimace, as a procession of mutes and undertakers. The characters are made either affectedly good and forbearing, with “all the milk of human kindness,” or purposely bad and disgust-

<sup>1</sup> See Mandeville’s “*Fable of the Bees*.”

ing, for the others to exercise their squeamish charities upon them. "The Conscious Lovers" is the best, but that is far from good, with the exception of the scene between Mr. Thomas and Phillis, who are fellow-servants, and commence lovers from being set to clean the window together. We are here once more in the company of our old friend, Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq. Indiana is as listless and as insipid as a drooping figure on an Indian screen; and Mr. Myrtle and Mr. Bevil only just disturb the still life of the scene. I am sorry that in this censure I should have Parson Adams against me, who thought "The Conscious Lovers" the only play fit for a Christian to see, and as good as a sermon. For myself, I would rather have read, or heard him read, one of his own manuscript sermons; and if the volume which he left behind him in his saddle-bags was to be had in print for love or money, I would at any time walk ten miles on foot only to get a sight of it.

Addison's "Drummer, or the Haunted House," is a pleasant farce enough, but adds nothing to our idea of the author of the "Spectator."

Pope's joint after-piece, called "An Hour after Marriage," was not a successful attempt. He brought into it "an alligator stuffed," which disconcerted the ladies, and gave just offence to the critics. Pope was too fastidious for a farce writer; and yet the most fastidious people, when they step out of their regular routine, are apt to become the grossest. The smallest offences against probability or decorum are, to their habitual scrupulousness, as unpardonable as the greatest. This was the rock on which Pope probably split. The affair was, however, hushed up; and he wreaked his discreet vengeance at leisure on the "odious endeavours," and more odious success of Colley Cibber in the line in which he had failed. Gay's "What-d'ye-call-it," is not one of his happiest things. His "Polly" is a complete failure, which, indeed, is the common fate of second parts. If the original Polly, in "The Beggar's Opera," had not had more winning ways with her, she would hardly have had so

many countesses for representatives as she has had, from her first appearance up to the present moment. [Gay's capital work is his "Beggar's Opera." It is, indeed, a masterpiece of wit and genius, not to say of morality. In composing it he chose a very unpromising ground to work upon, and he has prided himself in adorning it with all the graces, the precision and brilliancy of style. It is a vulgar error to call this a vulgar play. So far from it, that I do not scruple to say that it appears to me one of the most refined productions in the language. The elegance of the composition is in exact proportion to the coarseness of the materials ; by "happy alchemy of mind," the author has extracted an essence of refinement from the dregs of human life, and turns its very dross into gold. The scenes, characters, and incidents are, in themselves, of the lowest and most disgusting kind ; but, by the sentiments and reflections which are put into the mouths of highwaymen, turnkeys, their mistresses, wives, or daughters, he has converted this motley group into a set of fine gentlemen and ladies, satirists and philosophers. He has also effected this transformation without once violating probability, or "o'erstepping the modesty of nature." In fact, Gay has turned the tables on the critics ; and by the assumed licence of the mock-heroic style has enabled himself to do justice to nature, that is, to give all the force, truth, and locality of real feeling to the thoughts and expressions, without being called to the bar of false taste and affected delicacy. The extreme beauty and feeling of the song, "Woman is like the fair flower in its lustre," are only equalled by its characteristic propriety and *naïveté*. It may be said that this is taken from Tibullus ; but there is nothing about Covent Garden in Tibullus. Polly describes her lover going to the gallows with the same touching simplicity, and with all the natural fondness of a young girl in her circumstances, who sees in his approaching catastrophe nothing but the misfortunes and the personal accomplishments of the object of her affections. "I

see him sweeter than the nosegay in his hand : the admiring crowd lament that so lovely a youth should come to an untimely end—even butchers weep, and Jack Ketch refuses his fee rather than consent to tie the fatal knot." The preservation of the character and costume is complete. It has been said by a great authority—"There is some soul of goodness in things evil :"—and "*The Beggar's Opera*" is a good-natured but instructive comment on this text. The poet has thrown all the gaiety and sunshine of the imagination, all the intoxication of pleasure, and the vanity of despair, round the short-lived existence of his heroes ; while Peachum and Lockitt are seen in the back-ground, parcelling out their months and weeks between them. The general view exhibited of human life, is of the most subtle and abstracted kind. The author has, with great felicity, brought out the good qualities and interesting emotions almost inseparable from the lowest conditions ; and, with the same penetrating glance, has detected the disguises which rank and circumstances lend to exalted vice. Every line in this sterling comedy sparkles with wit, and is fraught with the keenest sarcasm. The very wit, however, takes off from the offensiveness of the satire ; and I have seen great statesmen, very great statesmen, heartily enjoying the joke, laughing most immoderately at the compliments paid to them as not much worse than pickpockets and cut-throats in a different line of life, and pleased, as it were, to see themselves humanized by some sort of fellowship with their kind. Indeed, it may be said that the moral of the piece is to show the vulgarity of vice ; or that the same violations of integrity and decorum, the same habitual sophistry in palliating their want of principle, are common to the great and powerful, with the lowest and most contemptible of the species. What can be more convincing than the arguments used by these would-be politicians, to show that in hypocrisy, selfishness, and treachery, they do not come up to many of their betters ? The exclamation of Mrs. Peachum, when

her daughter marries Macheath, "Hussey, hussey, you will be as ill-used, and as much neglected, as if you had married a lord," is worth all Miss Hannah More's laboured invectives on the laxity of the manners of high life!<sup>1</sup>

Fielding was a comic writer, as well as a novelist; but his comedies are very inferior to his novels: they are particularly deficient both in plot and character. The only excellence which they have is that of the

<sup>1</sup> The late ingenious Baron Grimm, of acute critical memory, was up to the merit of the "Beggar's Opera." In his Correspondence, he says, "If it be true that the nearer a writer is to nature, the more certain he is of pleasing, it must be allowed that the English, in their dramatic pieces, have greatly the advantage over us. There reigns in them an inestimable tone of nature, which the timidity of our taste has banished from French pieces. M. Patu has just published, in two volumes, 'A selection of smaller dramatic pieces, translated from the English,' which will eminently support what I have advanced. The principal one among this selection is the celebrated 'Beggar's Opera' of Gay, which has had such an amazing run in England. We are here in the very worst company imaginable; the *dramatis personæ* are robbers, pickpockets, gaolers, prostitutes, and the like; yet we are highly amused, and in no haste to quit them; and why? Because there is nothing in the world more original or more natural. There is no occasion to compare our most celebrated comic operas with this, to see how far we are removed from truth and nature, and this is the reason that, notwithstanding our wit, we are almost always flat and insipid. Two faults are generally committed by our writers, which they seem incapable of avoiding. They think they have done wonders if they have only faithfully copied the dictionaries of the personages they bring upon the stage, forgetting that the great art is to choose the moments of character and passion in those who are to speak, since it is those moments alone that render them interesting. For want of this discrimination, the piece necessarily sinks into insipidity and monotony. Why do almost all M. Vade's pieces fatigue the audience to death? Because all his characters speak the same language; because each is a perfect resemblance of the other. Instead of this, in 'The Beggar's Opera,' among eight or ten girls of the town, each has her separate character, her peculiar trials, her peculiar modes of expression, which give her a marked distinction from her companions."—Vol. I. p. 185.

style, which is the only thing in which his novels are deficient. The only dramatic pieces of Fielding that retain possession of the stage are, "The Mock Doctor" (a tolerable translation from Molière's *Médecin malgré lui*), and his "Tom Thumb," a very admirable piece of burlesque. The absurdities and bathos of some of our celebrated tragic writers could hardly be credited, but for the notes at the bottom of this preposterous medley of bombast, containing his authorities and the parallel passages. Dryden, Lee, and Shadwell, make no very shining figure there. Mr. Liston makes a better figure in the text. His Lord Grizzle is prodigious. What a name, and what a person ! It has been said of this ingenious actor, that "he is very great in Liston"; but he is even greater in Lord Grizzle. What a wig is that he wears ? How flighty, flaunting and fantastical ! Not "like those hanging locks of young Apollo," nor like the serpent-hair of the Furies of Aeschylus ; but as troubrous, though not as tragical as the one—as imposing, though less classical than the other. "*Que terribles sont ces cheveux gris,*" might be applied to Lord Grizzle's most valiant and magnanimous curls. This sapient courtier's "fell of hair does at a dismal treatise rouse and stir as life were in't." His wits seem flying away with the disorder of his flowing locks, and to sit as loosely on our hero's head as the caul of his peruke. What a significant vacancy in his open eyes and mouth ! what a listlessness in his limbs ! what an abstraction of all thought or purpose ! With what a headlong impulse of enthusiasm he throws himself across the stage when he is going to be married, crying, "Hey for Doctor's Commons," as if the genius of folly had taken whole-length possession of his person ! And then his dancing is equal to the discovery of a sixth sense—which is certainly very different from *common sense* ! If this extraordinary personage cuts a great figure in his life, he is no less wonderful in his death and burial. "From the sublime to the ridiculous there is but one step"; and this character would almost seem to prove,

that there is but one step from the ridiculous to the sublime.—Lubin Log, however inimitable in itself, is itself an imitation of something existing elsewhere; but the Lord Grizzle of this truly original actor, is a pure invention of his own. His Caper, in the “Widow’s Choice,” can alone dispute the palm with it in incoherence and volatility; for that, too, “is high fantastical,” almost as full of emptiness, in as grand a gusto of insipidity, as profoundly absurd, as elaborately nousensical! Why does not Mr. Liston play in some of Molière’s farces? I heartily wish that the author of “Love, Law, and Physic,” would launch him on the London boards in Monsieur Jourdain or Monsieur Pourceaugnac. The genius of Liston and Molière together—

“ — Must bid a gay defiance to mischance.”

Mr. Liston is an actor hardly belonging to the present age. Had he lived, unfortunately for us, in the time of Colley Cibber, we should have seen what a splendid niche he would have given him in his “Apology.”

Cibber is the hero of the “Dunciad”; but it cannot be said of him, that he was “by merit raised to that bad eminence.” He was pert, not dull; a coxcomb, not a blockhead; vain, but not malicious. Pope’s unqualified abuse of him was mere spleen; and the most obvious provocation to it seems to have been an excess of flippant vivacity in the constitution of Cibber. That Cibber’s “Birth-day Odes” were dull, is true; but this was not peculiar to him. It is an objection which may be made equally to Shadwell’s, to Whitehead’s, to Warton’s, to Pye’s, and to all others, except those which of late years have *not* been written! In his “Apology for his own Life,” Cibber is a most amusing biographer: happy in his own good opinion, the best of all others; teeming with animal spirits, and uniting the self-sufficiency of youth with the garrulity of age. His account of his waiting as a page behind the chair of the old Duchess of Marlborough at the time of the Revolution, who was then in the bloom of youth and

beauty, which seems to have called up in him the secret homage of "distant, enthusiastic, respectful love," fifty years after, and the compliment he pays to her (then in her old age), "a great grandmother without grey hairs," is as delightful as anything in fiction or romance; and is the evident origin of Mr. Burke's celebrated apostrophe to the Queen of France. Nor is the political confession of faith which he makes on this occasion, without a suitable mixture of vanity and sincerity: the vanity we may ascribe to the player, the sincerity to the politician. The self-complacency with which he talks of his own success, both as a player and a writer, is not greater than the candour and cordiality with which he does heaped justice to the merits of his theatrical contemporaries and predecessors. He brings down the history of the stage, either by the help of observation or tradition, from the time of Shakespeare to his own; and quite dazzles the reader with a constellation of male and female, of tragic and comic, of past and present excellence. He gives portraits at full length of Kynaston, of Betterton, of Booth, of Estcourt, of Pinkethman and Dogget, of Mohun and Wilks, of Nokes and Sandford, of Mrs. Montford, of Mrs. Oldfield, of Mrs. Barry, and Mrs. Bracegirdle, and of others of equal note; with delectable criticisms on their several performances, and anecdotes of their private lives, with scarcely a single particle of jealousy or ill-nature, or any other motive than to expatiate in the delight of talking of the ornaments of his art, and a wish to share his pleasure with the reader. I wish I could quote some of these theatrical sketches; but the time presses. The latter part of his work is less entertaining when he becomes Manager, and gives us an exact statement of his squabbles with the Lord Chamberlain, and the expense of his ground-rent, his repairs, his scenery, and his dresses.—In his plays, his personal character perhaps predominates too much over the inventiveness of his Muse; but so far from being dull, he is everywhere light, fluttering, and airy. His pleasure in himself made him desirous to please; but

his fault was, that he was too soon satisfied with what he did ; that his indolence or want of thought led him to indulge in the vein that flowed from him with most ease, and that his vanity did not allow him to distinguish between what he did best and worst. His "Careless Husband" is a very elegant piece of agreeable, thoughtless writing ; and the incident of Lady Easy throwing her handkerchief over her husband, whom she finds asleep in a chair by the side of her waiting-woman, was an admirable contrivance, taken, as he informs us, from real life. His "Double Gallant," which has been lately revived, though it cannot rank in the first, may take its place in the second or third class of comedies. It abounds in character, bustle, and stage-effect. It belongs to what may be called the composite style ; and very happily mixes up the comedy of intrigue, such as we see it in Mrs. Centlivre's Spanish plots, with a tolerable share of the wit and spirit of Congreve and Vanbrugh. As there is a good deal of wit, there is a spice of wickedness in this play, which was a privilege of the good old style of comedy, not altogether abandoned in Cibber's time. The luscious vein of the dialogue is stopped short in many of the scenes of the revived play, though not before we perceive its object—

" — In hidden mazes running,  
With wanton haste and giddy cunning."

These imperfect hints of double meanings, however, pass off without any marks of reprobation ; for, unless they are insisted on, or made pretty broad, the audience, from being accustomed to the cautious purity of the modern drama, are not very expert in deciphering the equivocal allusion, for which they are not on the look-out. To what is this increased nicety owing ? Was it that vice, from being formerly less common (though more fashionable), was less catching than at present ? The first inference is by no means in our favour : for though I think that the grossness of manners prevailing in our fashionable

comedies was a direct transcript of the manners of the Court at the time, or in the period immediately preceding, yet the same grossness of expression and allusion existed long before, as in the plays of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson, when there was not this grossness of manners, and it has of late years been gradually refining away. There is a certain grossness or freedom of expression, which may arise as often from unsuspecting simplicity as from avowed profligacy. Whatever may be our progress either in virtue or vice since the age of Charles II, certain it is that our manners are not mended since the time of Elizabeth and Charles I. Is it, then, that vice was formerly a thing more to be wondered at than imitated; that behind the rigid barriers of religion and morality it might be exposed freely, without the danger of any serious practical consequences—whereas now that the safeguards of wholesome authority and prejudice are removed, we seem afraid to trust our eyes or ears with a single situation or expression of a loose tendency, as if the mere mention of licentiousness implied a conscious approbation of it, and the extreme delicacy of our moral sense would be debauched by the bare suggestion of the possibility of vice? But I shall not take upon me to answer this question. The characters in the "Double Gallant" are well kept up. At-All and Lady Dainty are the two most prominent characters in this comedy, and those into which Cibber has put most of his own nature and genius. They are the essence of active impertinence and fashionable frivolity. Cibber, in short, though his name has been handed down to us as a byword of impudent pretension and impenetrable dullness by the classical pen of his accomplished rival, who, unfortunately, did not admit of any merit beyond the narrow circle of wit and friendship in which he himself moved, was a gentleman and a scholar of the old school; a man of wit and pleasantry in conversation, a diverting mimic, an excellent actor, an admirable dramatic critic, and one of the best comic writers of his age. His works (always excepting his

“Birth-day Odes”), instead of being a *caput mortuum* of literature, had a great deal of the spirit, with a little too much of the froth. His “Nonjuror” was taken from Molière’s “Tartuffe,” and has been altered to the “Hypocrite.” [This latter is a lively but very provoking comedy, and it is provoking from the nature of the subject. If such things are, it is provoking; or if they are not, that we should be made to believe them. In the “Tartuffe,” the glaring improbability of the plot, the absurdity of a man’s imposing on the credulity of another against the evidence of his senses, and without any proof of the sincerity of a religious charlatan but his own professions, is carried off by long formal speeches and pompous casuistry. We find our patience tired out, and our understandings perplexed, as if we were sitting in a court of law. Tartuffe is a plausible, fair-spoken, long-winded knave, who, if he could not be supposed to convince, might be supposed to confound his auditors. In the “Hypocrite” of Bickerstaff, the insidious, fawning, sophistical, accomplished French Abbé, is modernized into a low-lived, canting, impudent Methodist preacher. Dr. Cantwell is a sturdy beggar, and nothing more; he is not an impostor, but a bully. There is not in anything he says or does the least reason why Sir John Lambert should admit him into his family and friendship, suffer him to make love to his wife and daughter, disinherit his son in his favour, and obstinately refuse to listen to any insinuation or proof offered against the virtue and piety of his treacherous inmate. It might be said, that in the manners of the old French *régime* there was something to account for the blind ascendancy acquired by the priest over his benefactor, who might have submitted to be enthralled, robbed, cheated, and insulted, as a tacit proof of his religion and loyalty. The inquisitorial power exercised by the Church was then so great, that a man who refused to be priest-ridden, might very soon be suspected of designs against the State. Such, at least, is the best account we can give of the sameness of Molière’s

"Orgon." But in this country nothing of the kind could happen. A fellow like Dr. Cantwell could only have got admittance into the kitchen of Sir John Lambert, or to the ear of old Lady Lambert. The animal magnetism of such spiritual guides is, with us, directed against the weaker nerves of our female devotees. In the original, we admire the talents of the principal character; in the translation, we only wonder at the incredible weakness of his dupes. In short, the fault of the piece is that the author has attempted to amalgamate two contradictory characters, by engrafting our vulgar Methodist on the courtly French impostor; and this defect could not be remedied in the execution, however spirited or forcible. Mawworm is quite a local and rational character, and admirably fitted into the piece.] "Love's Last Shift" appears to have been the author's favourite; and he received the compliments of Sir John Vanbrugh and old Mr. Southern upon it—the latter said to him:—"Young man, your play is a good one; and it will succeed, if you do not spoil it by your acting." His plays did not always take equally. It is ludicrous to hear him complaining of the ill success of one of them, "Love in a Riddle," a pastoral comedy, "of a nice morality" and well spoken sentiments, which he wrote in opposition to the "Beggar's Opera," at the time when its worthless and vulgar rival was carrying everything triumphantly before it. Cibber brings this, with much pathetic *naïveté*, as an instance of the lamentable want of taste in the town!

The "Suspicious Husband" by Hoadley, the "Jealous Wife" by Colman, and the "Clandestine Marriage" by Colman and Garrick, are excellent plays of the middle style of comedy, which are formed rather by judgment and selection than by any original vein of genius; and have all the parts of a good comedy in degree, without having any one prominent, or to excess. The character of Ranger, in the "Suspicious Husband," is only a variation of those of Farquhar, of the same class as his Sir Harry Wildair and others,

without equal spirit. The "Jealous Wife" herself is, however, a dramatic *chef-d'œuvre*, and worthy of being acted as often, and better than it is. [Colman, the elder, was the translator of Terence: and the "Jealous Wife" is a classical play. The plot is regular, the characters well supported, and the moral the best in the world. The dialogue has more sense than wit. The ludicrous arises from the skilful development of the characters, and the absurdities they commit in their own persons, rather than from the smart reflections which are made upon them by others. Thus nothing can be more ridiculous or more instructive than the scenes of which Mrs. Oakly is the heroine, yet they are all serious and unconscious: she exposes herself to our contempt and ridicule by the part she acts, by the airs she gives herself, and her fantastic behaviour in the situations in which she is placed. In other words, the character is pure comedy, not satire. Congreve's comedies for the most part are satires, in which, from an exuberance of wit, the different speakers play off their sharp-pointed raillery on one another's foibles, real or supposed. The best and most genuine kind of comedy, because the most dramatic, is that of character or humour, in which the persons introduced upon the stage are left to betray their own folly by their words and actions. The progressive winding up of the story of the present comedy is excellently managed. The jealousy and hysterical violence of Mrs. Oakly increase every moment, as the pretext for them becomes more and more frivolous. The attention is kept alive by our doubts about Oakly's wavering (but in the end triumphant) firmness; and the arch insinuations and well-concerted home-thrusts of the Major heighten the comic interest of the scene. There is only one circumstance on which this veteran bachelor's freedom of speech might have thrown a little more light, namely, that the married lady's jealousy is in truth only a pretence for the exercise of her domineering spirit in general; so that we are left at last in some uncertainty as to the turn

which this humour may take, and as to the future repose of her husband, though the affair of Miss Russet is satisfactorily cleared up. The under-plot of the two lovers is very ingeniously fitted into the principal one, and is not without interest in itself. Charles Oakley is a spirited, well-meaning, thoughtless young fellow, and Harriet Russet is an amiable romantic girl, in that very common, but always romantic situation—in love. Her persecution from the addresses of Lord Trinket and Sir Harry Beagle fans the gentle flame which had been kindled just a year before in her breast, produces the adventures and cross-purposes of the plot, and at last reconciles her to, and throws her into the arms of her lover, in spite of her resentment for his misconduct and apparent want of delicacy. The figure which Lord Trinket and Lady Freelove make in the piece is as odious and contemptible as it is possible for people in that class of life (and for no others) to make. The insolence, the meanness, the affectation, the hollowness, the want of humanity, sincerity, principle, and delicacy, are such as can only be found where artificial rank and station in society supersede not merely a regard to propriety of conduct, but the necessity even of an attention to appearances. The morality of the stage has (we are ready to hope) told in that direction as well as others, has, in some measure, suppressed the suffocating pretensions and flaunting affectation of vice and folly in "persons of honour," and, as it were, humanized rank and title. The pictures drawn of the finished depravity of such characters in high life, in the old comedies and novels, can hardly have been thrown away upon the persons themselves, any more than upon the world at large. Little Terence O'Cutler, the delicious *protégé* of Lord Trinket and Lady Freelove, is a fit instrument for them to use, and follows in the train of such principals as naturally and assuredly as their shadow. Sir Harry Beagle is a coarse, but striking character of a thorough-bred fox-hunting country squire. He has but one idea in his head, but one sentiment in his heart—and that is his stud. This idea haunts his imagination, tinges

or imbues every other object, and accounts for his whole phraseology, appearance, costume, and conduct. Sir Harry's ruling passion is varied very ingeniously, and often turned to a very ludicrous account. There is a necessary monotony in the humour, which arises from a want of more than one idea, but the obviousness of the jest almost makes up for the recurrence of it; if the means of exciting mirth are mechanical, the effect is sure; and to say that a hearty laugh is cheaply purchased, is not a serious objection against it. When an author is terribly conscious of plagiarism, he seldom confesses it; when the obligation does not press his conscience, he sometimes does. Colman, in the advertisement to the first edition of the "*Jealous Wife*," apologizes for the freedom which he has used in borrowing from "*Tom Jones*." In reading this modest excuse, though we had seen the play several times, we could not imagine what part of the plot was taken from Fielding. We did not suspect that Miss Russet was Sophia Western, and that old Russet and Sir Harry Beagle between them somehow represented Squire Western and young Blifil. But so it is! The outline of the plot and some of the characters are certainly the same, but the filling up destroys the likeness. There is all in the novel that there is in the play, but there is so much in the novel that is not in the play, that the total impression is quite different, and loses even an appearance of resemblance. In the same manner, though a profile or a shade of a face is exactly the same as the original, we with difficulty recognize it from the absence of so many other particulars. Colman might have kept his own secret, and no one would have been the wiser for it.]

The "*Clandestine Marriage*" is nearly without a fault; and has some lighter theatrical graces, which I suspect Garrick threw into it. Canton is, I should think, his, though this classification of him among the ornamental parts of the play may seem whimsical. Garrick's genius does not appear to have been equal to the construction of a solid drama; but he could

retouch and embellish with great gaiety and knowledge of the technicalities of his art. Garrick not only produced joint-pieces and after-pieces, but often set off the plays of his friends and contemporaries with the garnish, the *sauce piquant*, of prologues and epilogues, at which he had an admirable knack.—The elder Colman's translation of Terence, I may here add, has always been considered, by good judges, as an equal proof of the author's knowledge of the Latin language, and taste in his own.

Bickerstaff's plays and comic operas are continually acted ; they come under the class of mediocrity, generally speaking. Their popularity seems to be chiefly owing to the unaffected ease and want of pretension with which they are written, with a certain humorous *naïveté* in the lower characters, and an exquisite adaptation of the music to the songs. His "Love in a Village" is one of the most delightful comic operas on the stage. It is truly pastoral ; and the sense of music hovers over the very scene like the breath of morning. In his alteration of the "Tartuffe" he has spoiled the "Hypocrite," but he has added Mawworm.

Mrs. Cowley's comedies of the "Belle's Stratagem," "Who's the Dupe," and others, are of the second or third class ; they are rather *réfacements* of the characters, incidents, and materials of former writers, got up with considerable liveliness and ingenuity, than original compositions, with marked qualities of their own.

Goldsmith's "Good-natured Man" is inferior to "She Stoops to Conquer" ; and even this last play, with all its shifting vivacity, is rather a sportive and whimsical effusion of the author's fancy, a delightful and delicately managed caricature, than a genuine comedy. [It, however, bears the stamp of the author's genius, which was an indefinable mixture of the original and imitative. His plot, characters, and incidents are all apparently new ; and yet, when you come to look into them, they are all old, with little variation or disguise : that is, the author sedulously avoided the beaten, vulgar path, and sought for singularity, but

found it rather in the unhackneyed and eccentric inventions of those who had gone before him, than in his own stores. The "Vicar of Wakefield," which abounds more than any of his works in delightful and original traits, is still very much borrowed, in its general tone and outline, from Fielding's "Joseph Andrews." Again, the characters and adventures of Tony Lumpkin, and the ridiculous conduct of his mother, in the present comedy, are a counterpart (even to the incident of the theft of the jewels) of those of the Widow Blackacre and her booby son in Wycherley's "Plain Dealer."

This sort of plagiarism, which gives us a repetition of new and striking pictures of human life, is much to be preferred to the dull routine of trite, vapid, every-day commonplaces ; but it is more dangerous, as the stealing of pictures or family plate, where the property can be immediately identified, is more liable to detection than the stealing of bank-notes, or the current coin of the realm. Dr. Johnson's sarcasm against some writer, that "his singularity was not his excellence," cannot be applied to Goldsmith's writings in general ; but we are not sure whether it might not in severity be applied to "She Stoops to Conquer." The incidents and characters are many of them exceedingly amusing ; but they are so, a little at the expense of probability and *bienéance*. Tony Lumpkin is a very essential and unquestionably comic personage ; but certainly his absurdities or his humours fail of none of their effect for want of being carried far enough. He is in his own sex what a hoyden is in the other. He is that vulgar nickname, a *hobbety-hoy*, dramatized ; forward and sheepish, mischievous and idle, cunning and stupid, with the vices of the man and the follies of the boy ; fond of low company, and giving himself all the airs of consequence of the young squire. His vacant delight in playing at cup and ball, and his impenetrable confusion and obstinate gravity in spelling the letter, drew fresh beauties from Mr. Liston's face. Young Marlow's bashfulness in the scenes with his mistress is, when well

acted, irresistibly ludicrous ; but still nothing can quite overcome our incredulity as to the existence of such a character in the present day, and in the rank of life, and with the education which Marlow is supposed to have had. It is a highly amusing caricature, a ridiculous fancy, but no more. One of the finest and most delicate touches of character is in the transition from the modest gentleman's manner with his mistress, to the easy and agreeable tone of familiarity with the supposed chamber-maid, which was not total and abrupt, but exactly such in kind and degree as such a character of natural reserve and constitutional timidity would undergo from the change of circumstances. Of the other characters in the piece, the most amusing are Tony Lumpkin's associates at the Three Pigeons ; and of these we profess the greatest partiality for the important showman who declares that "his bear dances to none but the genteest of tunes, 'Water parted from the Sea,' or the minuet in 'Ariadne' ! " This is certainly the "high-fantastical" of low comedy.]

Murphy's plays of "All in the Wrong" and "Know Your Own Mind," are admirably written ; with sense, spirit, and conception of character, but without any great effect of the humorous, or that truth of feeling which distinguishes the boundary between the absurdities of natural character and the gratuitous fictions of the poet's pen. The heroes of these two plays, Millamour and Sir Benjamin Constant, are too ridiculous in their caprices to be tolerated, except in farce ; and yet their follies are so flimsy, so motiveless, and fine-spun, as not to be intelligible, or to have any effect in their only proper sphere. Both his principal pieces are said to have suffered by their similarity, first, to Colman's "Jealous Wife," and next to the "School for Scandal," though in both cases he had the undoubted priority. It is hard that the fate of plagiarism should attend upon originality ; yet it is clear that the elements of the "School for Scandal" are not sparingly scattered in Murphy's comedy of "Know Your Own Mind," which appeared before

the latter play, only to be eclipsed by it. This brings me to speak of Sheridan.

Mr. Sheridan has been justly called "a dramatic star of the first magnitude"; and, indeed, among the comic writers of the last century he "shines like Hesperus among the lesser lights." He has left four several dramas behind him, all different or of different kinds, and all excellent in their way;—the "School for Scandal," the "Rivals," the "Duenna," and the "Critic." The attraction of this last piece is, however, less in the mock tragedy rehearsed than in the dialogue of the comic scenes, and in the character of Sir Fretful Plagiary, which is supposed to have been intended for Cumberland. If some of the characters in the "School for Scandal" were contained in Murphy's comedy of "Know Your Own Mind" (and certainly some of Dashwoud's detached speeches and satirical sketches are written with quite as firm and masterly a hand as any of those given to the members of the scandalous club, Mrs. Candour or Lady Sneerwell), yet they were buried in it for want of grouping and relief, like the colours of a well-drawn picture sunk in the canvas. Sheridan brought them out and exhibited them in all their glory. If that gem, the character of Joseph Surface, was Murphy's, the splendid and more valuable setting was Sheridan's. He took Murphy's Malvil from his lurking-place in the closet, and "dragged the struggling monster into day" upon the stage. That is, he gave interest, life, and action, or, in other words, its dramatic being, to the mere conception and written specimens of a character. This is the merit of Sheridan's comedies, that everything in them tells—there is no labour in vain. His comic muse does not go about prying into obscure corners, or collecting idle curiosities, but shows her laughing face and points to her rich treasure—the follies of mankind. She is garlanded and crowned with roses and vine-leaves. Her eyes sparkle with delight, and her heart runs over with good-natured malice. Her step is firm and light, and her ornaments consummate! The "School for

Scandal" is, if not the most original, perhaps the most finished and faultless comedy which we have. When it is acted you hear people all around you exclaiming, "Surely it is impossible for anything to be cleverer." The scene in which Charles sells all the old family pictures but his uncle's, who is the purchaser in disguise, and that of the discovery of Lady Teazle when the screen falls, are among the happiest and most highly wrought that comedy, in its wide and brilliant range, can boast. Besides the wit and ingenuity of this play, there is a genial spirit of frankness and generosity about it that relieves the heart as well as clears the lungs. It professes a faith in the natural goodness as well as habitual depravity of human nature. While it strips off the mask of hypocrisy it inspires a confidence between man and man. As often as it is acted it must serve to clear the air of that low, creeping, pestilent fog of cant and mysticism, which threatens to confound every native impulse, or honest conviction, in the nauseous belief of a perpetual lie, and the landable profession of systematic hypocrisy. The character of Lady Teazle is not well made out by the author, nor has it been well represented on the stage since the time of Miss Farren. The "Rivals" is a play of even more action and incident, but of less wit and satire than the "School for Scandal." It is as good as a novel in the reading, and has the broadest and most palpable effect on the stage. If Joseph Surface and Charles have a smack of Tom Jones and Blifil in their moral constitution, Sir Anthony Absolute and Mrs. Malaprop remind us of honest Matthew Bramble and his sister Tabitha in their tempers and dialect. Acres is a distant descendant of Sir Andrew Ague-cheek. It must be confessed of this author, as Falstaff says of some one, that "he had damnable iteration in him"! [The "Rivals" is one of the most agreeable comedies we have. In the elegance and brilliancy of the dialogue, in a certain animation of moral sentiment, and in the masterly *dénouement* of the fable, the "School for

"Scandal" is superior ; but the "Rivals" has more life and action in it, and abounds in a greater number of whimsical characters, unexpected incidents, and absurd contrasts of situation. The effect of the "School for Scandal" is something like reading a collection of epigrams, that of the "Rivals" is more like reading a novel. In the first you are always at the toilette or in the drawing-room ; in the last you pass into the open air, and take a turn in King's Mead. The interest is kept alive in the one play by smart repartees, in the other by startling rencontres ; in the one we laugh at the satirical descriptions of the speakers, in the other the situation of their persons on the stage is irresistibly ludicrous. Thus the interviews between Lucy and Sir Lucius O'Trigger, between Acres and his friend Jack, who is at once his confidant and his rival ; between Mrs. Malaprop and the lover of her niece as Captain Absolute, and between that young lady and the same person as the pretended Ensign Beverley, tell from the mere *double entendre* of the scene, and from the ignorance of the parties of one another's persons and designs. There is no source of dramatic effect more complete than this species of practical satire (in which our author seems to have been an adept), where one character in the piece is made a fool of and turned into ridicule to his face, by the very person whom he is trying to overreach.

There is scarcely a more delightful play than the "Rivals" when it is well acted, or one that goes off more indifferently when it is not. The humour is of so broad and farcical a kind, that if not thoroughly entered into and carried off by the tone and manner of the performers it fails of effect from its obtrusiveness, and becomes flat from eccentricity. The absurdities brought forward are of that artificial, affected, and preposterous description, that we in some measure require to have the evidence of our senses to see the persons themselves "jetting under the advanced plumes of their folly," before we can entirely believe in their existence, or derive pleasure from their exposure. If

the extravagance of the poet's conception is not supported by the downright reality of the representation, our credulity is staggered and falls to the ground.

For instance, Acres should be as odd a compound in external appearance as he is of the author's brain. He must look like a very notable mixture of the lively coxcomb and the blundering blockhead, to reconcile us to his continued impertinence and senseless flippancy. Acres is a mere conventional character, a gay, fluttering automaton, constructed upon mechanical principles, and pushed, as it were, by the logic of wit and a strict keeping in the pursuit of the ridiculous, into follies and fopperies which his natural thoughtlessness would never have dreamt of. Acres does not say or do what such a half-witted young gentleman would say or do of his own head, but what he might be led to do or say with such a prompter as Sheridan at his elbow to tutor him in absurdity—to make a butt of him first, and laugh at him afterwards. Thus his presence of mind in persisting in his allegorical swearing, "Odds triggers and flints," in the duel scene, when he is trembling all over with cowardice, is quite out of character, but it keeps up the preconcerted jest. In proportion, therefore, as the author has overdone the part, it calls for a greater effort of animal spirits, and a peculiar aptitude of genius in the actor to go through with it, to humour the extravagance, and to seem to take a real and cordial delight in caricaturing himself. Dodd was the only actor we remember who realized this ideal combination of volatility and phlegm, of slowness of understanding with levity of purpose, of vacancy of thought and vivacity of gesture. Acres's affected phrases and apish manners used to sit upon this inimitable actor with the same sort of bumpkin grace and conscious self-complacency as the new cut of his clothes. In general, this character is made little of on the stage; and when left to shift for itself, seems as vapid as it is forced.

Mrs. Malaprop is another portrait of the same overcharged description. The chief drollery of this extra-

ordinary personage consists in her unaccountable and systematic misapplication of hard words. How she should know the words, and not their meaning, is a little odd. In reading the play we are amused with such a series of ridiculous blunders, just as we are with a series of puns or cross-readings. But to keep up the farce upon the stage, besides "a nice derangement of epitaphs," the imagination must have the assistance of a stately array of grave pretensions, and a most formidable establishment of countenance, with all the vulgar self-sufficiency of pride and ignorance, before it can give full credit to this learned tissue of technical absurdity.

As to Miss Lydia Languish, she is not easily done to the life. She is a delightful compound of extravagance and *naïveté*. She is fond and froward, practical and chimerical, hot and cold in a breath. She is that kind of fruit which drops into the mouth before it is ripe. She must have a husband, but she will not have one without an elopement. This young lady is at an age and of a disposition to throw herself into the arms of the first handsome young fellow she meets; but she repents and grows sullen, like a spoiled child, when she finds that nobody hinders her. She should have all the physiognomical marks of a true boarding-school, novel-reading Miss about her, and some others into the bargain. Sir Anthony's description hardly comes up to the truth. She should have large, rolling eyes; pouting, disdainful lips; a pale, clear complexion; an oval chin, an arching neck, and a profusion of dark ringlets falling down upon it, or she will never answer to our ideas of the charming sentimental hoyden, who is the heroine of the play.

Faulkland is a refined study of a very common disagreeable character, actuated by an unceasing spirit of contradiction, who perversely seizes every idle pretext for making himself and others miserable; or querulous enthusiast, determined on disappointment, and enamoured with suspicion. He is without excuse; nor is it without some difficulty that we endure his

self-tormenting follies, through our partiality for Julia, the amiable, unresisting victim of his gloomy caprice.

Sir Anthony Absolute and his son are the most sterling characters of the play. The tetchy, positive, impatient, overbearing, but warm and generous character of the one, and the gallant, determined spirit, adroit address, and dry humour of the other, are admirably set off against each other. The two scenes in which they contend about the proposed match, in the first of which the indignant lover is as choleric and rash as the old gentleman is furious and obstinate, and in the latter of which the son affects such a cool indifference and dutiful submission to his father, from having found out that it is the mistress of his choice whom he is to be compelled to marry, are masterpieces both of wit, humour, and character. Sir Anthony Absolute is an evident copy after Smollett's kind-hearted, high-spirited Matthew Bramble, as Mrs. Malaprop is after the redoubted linguist, Mrs. Tabitha Bramble; and, indeed, the whole tone, as well as the local scenery of the "Rivals," reminds the reader of "Humphry Clinker." Sheridan had a right to borrow; and he made use of this privilege, not sparingly, both in this and in his other plays. His Acres, as well in the general character as in particular scenes, is a *mannered* imitation of Sir Andrew Ague-cheek.

Fag, Lucy, and Sir Lucius O'Trigger, though subordinate agents in the plot of the "Rivals," are not the less amusing on that account. Fag wears his master's wit, as he does his lace, at second-hand; Lucy is an edifying specimen of simplicity in a chamber-maid, and Sir Lucius is an honest fortune-hunting Hibernian, who means well to himself, and no harm to anybody else. They are also traditional characters, common to the stage; but they are drawn with all the life and spirit of originals.

This appears, indeed, to have been the peculiar forte and the great praise of our author's genius, that he could imitate with the spirit of an inventor. There is

hardly a character, we believe, or a marked situation in any of his works, of which there are not distinct traces to be found in his predecessors. But though the groundwork and texture of his materials was little more than what he found already existing in the models of acknowledged excellence, yet he constantly varied or improved upon their suggestions with masterly skill and ingenuity. He applied what he thus borrowed, with a sparkling effect and rare felicity, to different circumstances, and adapted it with peculiar elegance to the prevailing taste of the age. He was the farthest possible from a servile plagiarist. He wrote in imitation of Congreve, Vanbrugh, or Wycherley, as those persons would have written in continuation of themselves, had they lived at the same time with him. There is no excellence of former writers of which he has not availed himself, and which he has not converted to his own purposes, with equal spirit and success. He had great acuteness and knowledge of the world; and if he did not create his own characters, he compared them with their prototypes in nature, and understood their bearings and qualities, before he undertook to make a different use of them. He had wit, fancy, sentiment at command, enabling him to place the thoughts of others in new lights of his own, which reflected back an added lustre on the originals: whatever he touched, he adorned with all the ease, grace, and brilliancy of his style. If he ranks only as a man of second-rate genius, he was assuredly a man of first-rate talents. He was the most classical and the most popular dramatic writer of his age. The works he has left behind him will remain as monuments of his fame, for the delight and instruction of posterity.

Mr. Sheridan not only excelled as a comic writer, but was also an eminent orator, and a disinterested patriot. As a public speaker, he was distinguished by acuteness of observation and pointed wit, more than by impassioned eloquence, or powerful and comprehensive reasoning. Considering him with reference

to his conversational talents, his merits as a comic writer, and as a political character, his was perhaps the most accomplished person of his time.

"Take him for all in all,  
We shall not look upon his like again."]

The "Duenna" is a perfect work of art. It has the utmost sweetness and point. The plot, the characters, the dialogue, are all complete in themselves, and they are all his own ; and the songs are the best that ever were written, except those in the "Beggar's Opera." They have a joyous spirit of intoxication in them, and a strain of the most melting tenderness. Compare the softness of that beginning,

"Had I a heart for falsehood framed,"

with the spirited defiance to Fortune in the lines,

"Half thy malice youth could bear,  
And the rest a bumper drown."

It would have been too much for the author of these elegant and classic productions not to have had some drawbacks on his felicity and fame. But even the applause of nations and the favour of princes cannot always be enjoyed with impunity. Sheridan was not only an excellent dramatic writer, but a first-rate parliamentary speaker, and a disinterested patriot. His characteristics as an orator were manly, unperverted good sense, and keen irony. Wit, which has been thought a two-edged weapon, was by him always employed on the same side of the question—I think, on the right one. His set and more laboured speeches, as that on the Begum's affairs, were proportionably abortive and unimpressive ; but no one was equal to him in replying, on the spur of the moment, to pompous absurdity, and unravelling the web of flimsy sophistry. He was the last accomplished debater of the "House of Commons. His character will, however, soon be drawn by one who has all the ability, and every inclination to

do him justice ; who knows how to bestow praise and to deserve it ; by one who is himself an ornament of private and of public life ; a satirist, beloved by his friends ; a wit and a patriot to boot ; a poet, and an honest man.

Macklin's "Man of the World" has one powerfully written character, that of Sir Pertinax Macsycophant, but it required Cooke's acting to make it thoroughly effectual.

Mr. Holcroft, in his "Road to Ruin," set the example of that style of comedy, in which the *slang* phrases of jockey-noblemen and the humours of the four-in-hand club are blended with the romantic sentiments of distressed damsels and philosophic waiting-maids, and in which he has been imitated by the most successful of our living writers, unless we make a separate class for the school of Cumberland, who was almost entirely devoted to the *comédie larmoyante*, and who, passing from the light, volatile spirit of his "West Indian," to the mawkish sensibility of the "Wheel of Fortune," linked the Muse of English comedy to the genius of German tragedy, where she has since remained, like Christabel fallen asleep in the Witch's arms, and where I shall leave her, as I have not the poet's privilege to break the spell. [As to the "West Indian," it is a play that from the time of its first appearing has continued to hold possession of the stage, with just enough merit to keep it there, and no striking faults to drive it thence. It is above mediocrity. There is an agreeable vein of good humour and animal spirits running through it that does not suffer it to sink into downright insipidity, nor ever excites any very high degree of interest or delight. Wit there is none, and hardly an attempt at humour, except in the character of Major O'Flaherty, who would not be recognized as a genuine Irishman but by virtue of his representative on the stage. His blunders and conduct are not such as would proceed from the good-natured unthinking impetuosity of such a person as O'Flaherty is intended to be : but they are such as the author might sit down

and try to invent for him. It is not an Irish character, but a character playing the Irishman ; not a hasty, warm-hearted, hare-brained fellow, stumbling on mistakes by accident either in his words or actions, but a very complaisant gentleman, looking out for them by design, to honour the opinion which you entertain of him, and who is to make himself a national butt for the audience to laugh at. The "West Indian" himself (Belcour) is certainly the support of the piece. There is something interesting in the idea of seeing a young fellow of high animal spirits, a handsome fortune, and considerable generosity of feeling, launched from the other side of the world (with the additional impetus that the distance would give him) to run the gauntlet of the follies and vices of the town, to fall into scrapes only to get out of them, and who is full of professions of attachment to virtues which he does not practise, and of repentance for offences which he has not committed. It is the same character as Charles Surface in the "School for Scandal" with an infusion of the romantic from his transatlantic origin, and an additional excuse for his extravagances in the tropical temperature of his blood.

The language of this play is elegant but commonplace : the speakers seem in general more intent on adjusting their periods than on settling their affairs. The sentiments aspire to liberality. They are amiably mawkish, and as often as they incline to paradox, have a rapid sort of petulance about them, which excites neither our sympathy nor our esteem. The plot is a good plot. It is well laid, decently distributed through the course of five acts, and wound up at last to its final catastrophe in a single sentence.]

There are two other writers whom I have omitted to mention, but not forgotten : they are our two immortal farce-writers, the authors of the "Mayor of Garratt" and the "Agreeable Surprise." If Foote has been called our English Aristophanes, O'Keefe might well be called our English Molière. The scale of the modern writer was smaller, but the spirit is the

same. In light, careless laughter, and pleasant exaggerations of the humorous, we have had no one equal to him. There is no labour or contrivance in his scenes, but the drollery of his subject seems to strike irresistibly upon his fancy, and run away with his discretion as it does with ours. His "Cowslip" and "Lingo" are "Touchstone" and "Audrey" revived. He is himself a modern antique. His fancy has all the quaintness and extravagance of the old writers, with the ease and lightness which the moderns arrogate to themselves. All his pieces are delightful, but the "Agreeable Surprise" is the most so. There are in this some of the most irresistible *double entendres*, the most felicitous blunders in situation and character, that can be conceived; and in Lingo's superb replication, "A scholar! I was a master of scholars," he has hit the height of the ridiculous. Foote had more dry, sarcastic humour, and more knowledge of the world. His farces are bitter satires, more or less personal, as it happened. Mother Cole, in the "Minor," and Mr. Smirk the Auctioneer, in "Taste," with their coadjutors, are rich cut-and-come-again, "pleasant, though wrong." But the "Mayor of Garratt" is his *magnum opus* in this line. Some comedies are long farces: this farce is a comedy in little. It is also one of the best acted farces that we have. The acting of Dowton and Russell, in Major Sturgeon and Jerry Sneak, cannot be too much praised; Foote himself would have been satisfied with it. The strut, the bluster, the hollow swaggering, and turkey-cock swell of the Major; and Jerry's meekness, meanness, folly, good-nature, and hen-pecked air, are assuredly done to the life. The latter character is even better than the former, which is saying a bold word. Dowton's art is only an imitation of art, of an affected or an assumed character; but in Russell's Jerry you see the very soul of nature, in a fellow that is "pigeon-livered and lacks gall," laid open and anatomized. You can see that his heart is no bigger than a pin, and his head is as soft as a pippin. His whole aspect is chilled and frightened, as if he had

been dipped in a pond ; and yet he looks as if he would like to be snug and comfortable if he durst. He smiles as if he would be friends with you upon any terms, and the tears come in his eyes because you will not let him. The tones of his voice are prophetic as the cuckoo's under-song. His words are made of water-gruel. The scene in which he tries to make a confidant of the Major is great ; and his song of "Robinson Crusoe" as melancholy as the island itself. The reconciliation-scene with his wife, and his exclamation over her, "to think that I should make my Molly *weep!*" are pathetic, if the last stage of human infirmity is so. This farce appears to me to be both moral and entertaining ; yet it does not take. It is considered as an unjust satire on the city, and the country at large ; and there is a very frequent repetition of the word "nonsense" in the house, during the performance. Mr. Dowton was even hissed, either from the upper boxes or gallery, in his speech recounting the marching of his corps "from Brentford to Ealing, and from Ealing to Acton" ; and several persons in the pit, who thought the whole *low*, were for going out. This shows well for the progress of civilization. I suppose the manners described in the "Mayor of Garratt" have, in the last forty years, become obsolete, and the characters ideal : we have no longer either hen-pecked or brutal husbands, or domineering wives ; the Miss Molly Jollops no longer *wew werry Sneaks*, or admire the brave Major Sturgeons on the other side of Temple Bar ; all our soldiers have become heroes, and our magistrates respectable, and the farce of life is over.

One more name, and I have done. It is that of Peter Pindar. The historian of "Sir Joseph Banks" and the "Emperor of Morocco," of the "Pilgrims and the Peas," of the "Royal Academy," and of "Mr. Whitbread's brewing-vat," the bard in whom the nation and the king delighted, is old and blind, but still merry and wise ;—remembering how he has made "the world laugh in his time, and not repenting of the mirth he has given ; with an involuntary smile lighted up at the

mad pranks of his Muse, and the lucky hits of his pen—“faint picture of those flashes of his spirit, that were wont to set the table in a roar”; like his own expiring taper, bright and fitful to the last; tagging a rhyme or coining his own epitaph; and waiting for the last summons, grateful and contented!

I have thus gone through the history of that part of our literature which I had proposed to myself to treat of. I have only to add, by way of explanation, that in some few parts I had anticipated myself in fugitive or periodical publications; and I thought it better to repeat what I had already stated to the best of my ability, than alter it for the worse. These parts bear, however, a very small proportion to the whole; and I have used such diligence and care as I could, in adding to them whatever appeared necessary to complete the general view of the subject, or make it (as far as lay in my power) interesting to others.

THE END



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7

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 WHITE (GILBERT). *The Natural History of Selborne* (22).  
 WHITMAN. *Specimen Days in America* (371).

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- AINSWORTH (W. HARRISON). *The Tower of London* (162).  
 AUSTEN (JANE). *Emma* (129). *Pride and Prejudice* (335). *Mansfield Park* (345). *Northanger Abbey* (355). *Persuasion* (356).  
*Sense and Sensibility* (389).  
 BLACKMORE (R. D.). *Lorna Doone* (171).  
 BORROW (GEORGE). *Lavengro* (66). *The Romany Rye* (73).  
 BRONTE (ANNE). *Agnes Grey* (141). *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (67).  
 BRONTE (CHARLOTTE). *Jane Eyre* (1). *Shirley* (14). *Villette* (47).  
*The Professor, and the Poems of the Brontës* (78).  
 BRONTE (EMILY). *Wuthering Heights* (10).  
 BUNYAN. *The Pilgrim's Progress* (12). *Mr. Badman* (338).  
 BUTLER (SAMUEL). *The Way of all Flesh* (438).  
 CERVANTES. *Don Quixote*. 2 volumes (130, 131).  
 COBDOLD (REV. RICHARD). *Margaret Catchpole* (119).  
 COLLINS (WILKIE). *The Moonstone*. Introduction by T. S. Eliot (316). *The Woman in White* (226).  
 COOPER (J. FENIMORE). *The Last of the Mohicans* (163).  
 DEFOE. *Robinson Crusoe*. Part I (17).  
 DICKENS. *Barnaby Rudge* (286). *Christmas Books* (307). *Edwin Drood* (263). *Great Expectations* (128). *Hard Times* (264).  
*Old Curiosity Shop* (270). *Oliver Twist* (8). *Pickwick Papers*. 2 volumes (120, 121). *Tale of Two Cities* (38).  
 DIEREALI (BENJAMIN). *Coningsby* (381). *Sybil* (291).  
 DOUGLAS (G.). *The House with the Green Shutters*. Intro. by W. Somerset Maugham (466).  
 ELIOT (GEORGE). *Adam Bede* (63). *Felix Holt* (179). *The Mill on the Floss* (31). *Romola* (178). *Scenes of Clerical Life* (155).  
*Silas Marner*, &c. (80).  
 FIELDING. *Jonathan Wild* (382). *Joseph Andrews* (334).  
 GALT (JOHN). *The Entail* (177).  
 GASKELL (MRS.). *Cousin Phillis, and Other Tales*, &c. (168).  
*Cranford*, *The Cage at Cranford*, and *The Moorland Cottage* (110). *Lizzie Leigh*, *The Grey Woman*, and *Other Tales*, &c. (175). *Mary Barton* (86). *North and South* (154). *Right at Last*, and *Other Tales*, &c. (203). *Round the Sofa* (190). *Ruth* (88). *Sylvia's Lovers* (156). *Wives and Daughters* (157).  
 GOLDSMITH. *The Vicar of Wakefield* (4).  
 HARRIS (JOEL CHANDLER). *Uncle Remus* (361).  
 HAWTHORNE. *House of the Seven Gables* (273). *The Scarlet Letter* (26). *Tales* (319).  
 HOLME (CONSTANCE). *Beautiful End* (431). *Crump Folk going Home* (419). *He-who-came?* (440). *The Lonely Plough* (390).  
*The Old Road from Spain* (400). *The Splendid Fairing* (416).  
*The Things which Belong—* (425). *The Trumpet in the Dust* (409). *The Wisdom of the Simple*, &c. (453).

## FICTION

9

- KINGSLEY (HENRY). *Geoffry Hamlyn* (271). *Ravenshoe* (267).  
 Austin Elliot (407).
- LA MOTTE FOQUÉ. *Undine, Sintram, &c.* (408).
- LESAGE. *Gil Blas*. 2 vols. (151, 152).
- MACKENZIE (COMPTON). *Guy and Pauline*. With new Introduction by the Author (461).
- MARRYAT. *Mr. Midshipman Easy* (160). *Jacob Faithful* (439).
- MELVILLE (HERMAN). *Moby Dick* (225). *Typee* (274). *Omoo* (275). *White Jacket* (253).
- MORIER (J. J.). *Hajji Baba* (238). *Hajji Baba in England* (285).
- PRACOKE (T. L.). *Headlong Hall*; and *Nightmare Abbey* (339).  
*Misfortunes of Elphin*; and *Crotchet Castle* (244).
- RABELAIS. *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. 3 volumes (411-13).
- SCOTT. *Ivanhoe* (29).
- SMOLLETT. *Roderick Random* (353). *Humphry Clinker* (290).
- STERNE. *Sentimental Journey* (333). *Tristram Shandy* (40).
- STEVENSON (R. L.). *Kidnapped*; and *Catrina* (297). *The Master of Ballantrae* (441). *Treasure Island* (295).
- STURGIS (HOWARD). *Belchamber* (429).
- SWIFT. *Gulliver's Travels* (20).
- SWINNERTON (FRANK). *Nocturne* (460).
- TAYLOR (MEADOWS). *Confessions of a Thug* (207).
- THACKERAY. *Henry Esmond* (28).
- TOLSTOY. Translated by *Louise* and *Aylmer Maude*. *Anna Karenina*. 2 volumes (220, 221). *Childhood, Boyhood, and Youth* (352). *The Cossacks, &c.* (208). *Iván Il'yich*, and *Hadjí Murád* (432). *The Kreutzer Sonata, &c.* (266). *Resurrection*, trans. by *L. Maude* (209). *Twenty-three Tales* (72). *War and Peace*. 3 volumes (233-5).
- TROLLOPE. *American Senator* (391). *Aysal's Angel* (342). *Barchester Towers* (268). *The Belton Estate* (251). *Can you forgive her?* 2 vols. (468, 469). *The Claverings* (252). *Cousin Henry* (343). *Doctor Thorne* (298). *Dr. Wortle's School* (317). *The Duke's Children*. 2 vols. (462, 463). *The Eustace Diamonds* (357). *Framley Parsonage* (305). *The Kellys and the O'Kellys* (341). *Lady Anna* (443). *Last Chronicle of Barset*. 2 vols. (398, 399). *Miss Mackenzie* (278). *Orley Farm*. 2 vols. (423, 424). *Phineas Finn*. 2 vols. (447, 448). *Phineas Redux*. 2 vols. (450, 451). *The Prime Minister*. 2 vols. (454, 455). *Rachel Ray* (279). *Ralph the Heir*. 2 vols. (475, 476). *Sir Harry Hotspur* (336). *The Small House at Allington*. 2 vols. (472, 473). *Tales of all Countries* (397). *The Three Clerks* (140). *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (272). *The Warden* (317). *The Way we Live now*. 2 vols. (484, 485).
- WALPOLE (HUGH). *Prelude to Adventure* (465).
- WATTS-DUNTON (THEODORE). *Aylwin* (52).
- WHARTON (EDITH). *The House of Mirth* (437).

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- BARROW (SIR JOHN): *The Mutiny of the Bounty* (195).  
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 CHESTERFIELD. *Letters*. Selected, with an Introduction, by Phyllis M. Jones (347).  
 CONGREVE. *Letters*, in Volume II. See under *Drama* (277).  
 COWPER. *Letters*. Selected, with Intro., by E. V. Lucas (138).  
 DUFFERIN (LORD). *Letters from High Latitudes*. Illustrated (158).  
 GRAY (THOMAS). *Letters*. Selected by John Beresford (283).  
 JOHNSON (SAMUEL). *Letters*. Selected, with Introduction, by R. W. Chapman (282).  
 SOUTHEY. *Selected Letters* (169).  
 WHITE (GILBERT). *The Natural History of Selborne* (22).

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- AMERICAN CRITICISM. *Representative Literary Essays*. Chosen by Norman Foerster (354).  
 COLEBRIDGE (S. T.) *Lectures on Shakespeare* (363).  
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 HORNE (R. H.). *A New Spirit of the Age* (127).  
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(For POLITICAL THEORY and RELIGION see separate headings)

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- GOLDSMITH. *Poems*. Introduction by Austin Dobson (123).
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- HERRICK (ROBERT). *Poems* (16).

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- HOOD. Poems. Introduction by Walter Jerrard (87).
- IBSEN. *Peer Gynt*. Translated by R. Ellis Roberts (446).
- KRATS. Poems (7).
- KEBLE. *The Christian Year* (181).
- LONGFELLOW. *Hiawatha*, Miles Standish, &c. (174).
- MACAULAY. *Lays of Ancient Rome*; *Ivry*; *The Armada* (27).
- MARLOWE. Dr. Faustus (with Goethe's Faust, Part I, trans. J. Anster). Introduction by Sir A. W. Ward (135). Plays (478).
- MILTON. *The English Poems* (182).
- MORRIS (WILLIAM). *The Defence of Guenevere*, *Life and Death of Jason*, and other Poems (183).
- NARRATIVE VERSE, A Book of. Compiled by V. H. Collins. With an Introduction by Edmund Blunden (350).
- PALGRAVE. *The Golden Treasury*. With additional Poems (133).
- ROSSETTI (CHRISTINA). *Goblin Market*, &c. (184).
- SCOTT (SIR WALTER). Selected Poems (186).
- SCOTTISH VERSE, A Book of. Compiled by R. L. Mackie (417).
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- SWINBURNE (A. C.). Selected Poems (481).
- TENNYSON. Selected Poems. Intro. by Sir Herbert Warren (3).
- VIRGIL. *The Aeneid*, *Georgics*, and *Elegiacs*. Translated by Dryden (37). Translated by James Rhoades (227).
- WELLS (CHARLES). Joseph and his Brethren. A Dramatic Poem. Intro. by A. C. Swinburne, and Note by T. Watts-Dunton (143).
- WHITMAN. A Selection. Introduction by E. de Selincourt (218).
- WHITTIER. Poems: A Selection (188).
- WORDSWORTH. Poems: A Selection (189).

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- BAGEHOT (WALTER). *The English Constitution*. With an Introduction by the Earl of Balfour (330).
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- ENGLISH SPEECHES, from BURKE to GLADSTONE. Selected and edited by E. R. Jones (191).
- MACAULAY. Speeches. Selected by G. M. Young (433).
- MACHIAVELLI. *The Prince* (43).

- MAINE (SIR HENRY). *Ancient Law* (362).
- MILL (JOHN STUART). *On Liberty, Representative Government, and the Subjection of Women* (170).
- MILTON (JOHN). *Selected Prose*. Intro. *Malcolm W. Wallace* (293).
- RUSKIN. 'A Joy for Ever', and *The Two Paths*. Illustrated (147). *Time and Tide, and The Crown of Wild Olive* (146). *Unto this Last, and Munera Pulveris* (148).
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- BUNYAN. *The Pilgrim's Progress* (12). *Mr. Badman* (338).
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- GERMAN SHORT STORIES. Translated by *E. N. Bennett* (415).
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- HAWTHORNE (NATHANIEL). Tales (319).
- HOLME (CONSTANCE). *The Wisdom of the Simple*, &c. (453).
- IRVING (WASHINGTON). Tales (320).
- PERSIAN (FROM THE). *The Three Dervishes*, and Other Stories. Translated from MSS. in the Bodleian by *Reuben Levy* (254).
- POE (EDGAR ALLAN). Tales of Mystery and Imagination (21).
- POLISH TALES BY MODERN AUTHORS. Translated by *Else C. M. Benecke* and *Marie Busch* (230).
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- SCOTT. Short Stories. With an Introduction by *Lord David Cecil* (414).
- SPANISH SHORT STORIES. Sixteenth Century. In contemporary translations, revised, with Introduction, by *J. B. Trend* (326).
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- TROLLOPE. Tales of all Countries (397).

## ¶ Travel and Topography

- BORROW (GEORGE). *The Bible in Spain* (75). *Wild Wales* (224). *Lavengro* (66). *The Romany Rye* (73).
- DUFFERRIN (LORD). Letters from High Latitudes (158).
- MELVILLE (HERMAN). *Typee* (294). *Omoo* (275).
- MORIER (J. J.). *Hajji Baba of Isphahan*. Introduction by *C. W. Stewart*, and a Map (238).
- SMOLLETT (TOBIAS). Travels through France and Italy in 1765. Introduction (lxii pages) by *Thomas Seccombe* (90).
- SERNE (LAURENCE). *A Sentimental Journey* (333).

## INDEX OF AUTHORS, ETC.

- Addison, 6.  
Aeschylus, 5.  
Africa, Stories of, 13.  
Ainsworth (W. Harrison), 8.  
À Kempis (Thomas), 13.  
Aksakoff (Sergei), 4.  
American Criticism, 4, 10.  
American Verse, 4.  
Ancient Law, 13.  
Apocrypha The (R. V.), 13.  
Aristophanes, 5.  
Arnold (Matthew), 11.  
Aurelius (Marcus), 11, 13.  
Austen (Jane), 8.  
Austrian Short Stories, 13.  
  
Bacon (Francis), 11.  
Bagehot (Walter), 12.  
Barrow (Sir John), 10.  
Beaumont and Fletcher, 6.  
Blackmore (R. D.), 8.  
Blake (William), 11.  
Borrow (George), 3, 14.  
British Colonial Policy, 13.  
    Foreign Policy, 13.  
Brontë Sisters, 8, 11.  
Browning (Robert), 6, 11.  
Buckle (T. H.), 10, 12.  
Buddha, Sayings of the, 13.  
Bunyan (John), 8.  
Burke, 12.  
Burns (Robert), 11.  
Butler, 8.  
Byron (Lord), 11.  
  
Carlyle (Thomas), 5, 6, 10.  
Cellini (Benvenuto), 4.  
Cervantes, 8.  
Chaucer, 11.  
Chesterfield, 10.  
Cubbold (Richard), 8.  
Coleridge (S. T.), 10, 11.  
Collins (Wilkie), 8.  
Colman, 6.  
Confucius, 13.  
Congreve (William), 6, 11.  
Cooper (J. Fenimore), 8.  
Cowper (William), 10.  
Crabbe, 5.  
Crime and Detection, 13.  
Critical Essays, 3, 7, 10.  
Czech Tales, 14.  
  
Dante, 3, 11.  
Darwin (Charles), 11.  
Defoe (Daniel), 8.  
Dekker, 6.  
De Quincey (Thomas), 4.  
Dickens (Charles), 8, 14.  
  
Disraeli (Benjamin), 8.  
Dobson (Austin), 5, 7, 14.  
Don Quixote, 8.  
Douglas (George), 8.  
Dryden, 5, 6.  
Dufferin (Lord), 10, 14.  
  
Eighteenth-Century Comedies,  
Eliot (George), 8.  
Elizabethan Comedies, 6.  
Elizabethan Tragedies, 6.  
Emerson (R. W.), 7.  
English Critical Essays, 7, 10.  
English Essays, 3, 4.  
English Prose, 4.  
English Sermons, 7.  
English Short Stories, 3, 4, 14.  
English Songs and Ballads, 4, 11.  
English Speeches, 12.  
English Verse, 4, 11.  
  
Farquhar, 6.  
Fielding (Henry), 6, 8.  
Four Gospels, 13.  
Francis (St.), 5, 11.  
Franklin (Benjamin), 4.  
French Short Stories 14.  
Froude (J. A.), 7.  
  
Galt (John), 8.  
Gaskell (Mrs.), 5, 8, 14.  
Gay, 6.  
German Short Stories, 14.  
Ghosts and Marvels, 14.  
Gibbon (Edward), 4, 10.  
Gil Blas, 9.  
Goethe, 6, 11, 12.  
Goldsmith (Oliver), 6, 8, 11.  
Gray (Thomas), 10, 11.  
  
Harris (J. C.), 8.  
Harte (Bret), 14.  
Hawthorne (Nathaniel), 8, 14.  
Haydon (B. R.), 5.  
Hazlitt (William), 5, 7, 10.  
Herrick (Robert), 11.  
Holme (Constance), 8, 14.  
Holmes (Oliver Wendell), 7.  
Horner, 5, 12.  
Hood (Thomas), 12.  
Horne (R. H.), 7.  
Houghton (Lord), 5.  
Hunt (Leigh), 5, 7.  
  
Ibsen (Henrik), 6, 12.  
Inchbald (Mrs.), 6.  
Ingoldsby Legends, 11.  
International Affairs, 13.  
Irving (Washington), 7, 10, 14.

- Johnson (Samuel), 5, 10.  
 Keats, 12.  
 Keble (John), 12.  
 Keith (A. B.), 13.  
 Kingsley (Henry), 9.  
 Koran, The, 13.  
 Lamb (Charles), 7.  
 La Motte Fouqué, 9.  
 Landor (W. S.), 7.  
 La Rochefoucauld, 7.  
 Lessage, 9.  
 Longfellow (H. W.), 12.  
 Macaulay (T. B.), 5, 10, 12.  
 Machiavelli, 12.  
 Mackenzie (Compton), 9.  
 Maine, Sir Henry, 13.  
 Marcus Aurelius, 11, 13.  
 Marlowe (Christopher), 6, 12.  
 Marryat (Captain), 9.  
 Massinger, 6.  
 Maude (Aylmer), 3, 5.  
 Meinhold (J. W.), 9.  
 Melville (Herman), 9, 14.  
 Mill (John Stuart), 5, 13.  
 Milton (John), 7, 12.  
 Montaigne, 7.  
 More (Paul Elmer), 10.  
 Morier (J. J.), 9, 14.  
 Morris (W.), 12.  
 Morton, 6.  
 Motley (J. L.), 10.  
 Murphy, 6.  
 Narrative Verse, 4, 12.  
 New Testament, 13.  
 Old Testament, 13.  
 Otway, 6.  
 Palgrave (F. T.), 4.  
 Pamphlets and Tracts, 4, 7.  
 Peacock (T. L.), 9.  
 Peacock (W.), 4.  
 Persian (From the), 14.  
 Poe (Edgar Allan), 14.  
 Polish Tales, 14.  
 Prescott (W. H.), 10.  
 Pre-Shakespearean Comedies, 6.  
 Rabelais, 3, 9.  
 Reading at Random, 4.  
 Redman (B. R.), 4.  
 Restoration 'I raggedies, 6.  
 Reynolds (Frederick), 6.  
 Reynolds (Sir Joshua), 7.  
 Rossetti (Christina), 12.  
 Rowe, 6.  
 Ruskin (John), 7, 13.  
 Russian Short Stories, 14.  
 Rutherford (Mark), 7.  
 Sainte-Beuve, 10.  
 Scott (Sir W.), 5, 9, 12, 14.  
 Scottish Verse, 4, 12.  
 Sermons (English), 7, 13.  
 Shakespeare, 6, 12.  
 Shakespeare Criticism, 10.  
 Shakespeare's Predecessors and  
Contemporaries, 6.  
 Shelley, 12.  
 Sheridan (R. B.), 6.  
 Smith (Adam), 13.  
 Smith (Alexander), 7.  
 Smollett (T.), 7, 9, 14.  
 Sophocles, 5.  
 Southerne, 6.  
 Southey (Robert), 10.  
 Spanish Short Stories, 14.  
 Stanhope (Lord), 5.  
 Steele, 6.  
 Sterne (Laurence), 7, 9, 14.  
 Stevenson (R. L.), 7, 9.  
 Sturgis, 9.  
 Swift (Jonathan), 9.  
 Swinburne, 12.  
 Swinnerton (Frank), 9.  
 Taylor (Meadows), 9.  
 Tennyson (Lord), 12.  
 Thackeray (W. M.), 9.  
 Three Dervishes, The, 14.  
 Tolstoy, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 13, 14.  
 Tracts and Pamphlets, 4, 7.  
 Trevelyan, 5.  
 Trollope (Anthony), 3, 5, 9, 14.  
 Virgil, 5, 12.  
 Walpole (Hugh), 9.  
 Walton (Izaak), 5, 8.  
 Watts-Dunton (Theodore), 9.  
 Webster, 6.  
 Wellington (Duke of), 5.  
 Wells (Charles), 12.  
 Wells (H. G.), 4.  
 Wharton (Edith), 9.  
 White (Gilbert), 8, 10.  
 Whitman (Walt), 8, 12.  
 Whittier (J. G.) 12.  
 Wordsworth (William), 12.

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